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Prologue

Blades of grass surrounding the dark gray she-cat rustled, parting to reveal a starry figure before her. Eyes as bright as dawn glimmered mysteriously, the cat's tail flicking towards a small puddle of water nearby. The dark gray she-cat hesitated, but her paws took her forward to stand by the star-cat's side. Glancing down, the pristine water below showed two cats standing side-by-side. Their pelts were as different as sun-high and moon-high, but their eyes gleamed with a secret unknown.

"Blood and shadows will be overrun, and the stars themselves will bow." With a final flick of its tail, the cat vanished, leaving the she-cat to gaze into the puddle. Her green eyes grew wide with fear as blood overtook the water, the crimson liquid seeping onto the ground around her and swallowing her into its depths.

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"Heatherheart," the urgent mew of her apprentice, Mudfur, roused Heatherheart from her nightmare. His mud-colored pelt reminded her why the name suited him so well. "Cloudsky is kitting," his eyes were filled to the brim with excitement. Paws working furiously at the stone beneath him, he twitched his whiskers impatiently. Heatherheart has almost forgotten that this would be Mudfur's first kitting.

"I'm coming," she grunted. Lifting her sleep-laden paw and giving it a quick lick. "Have you given her raspberry leaves..." Mudfur nodded enthusiastically, parting his jaws to reply. "... and some wet moss?" Heatherheart finished, struggling to hold back an amused purr as his head sank. "Get to it, then," she dismissed. He quickly turned tail and sprinted out of the den, heading towards the camp exit. Shaking the horrific dream from her mind, Heatherheart tried to get in good spirits for the oncoming kits.

Her mind raced at the thought of the two sun-high and moon-high cats, their body sizes as different as their pelts, but Heatherheart

couldn't put a face to the pelts. Giving herself a rough shake, she shouldered her way through the bracken covering the entrance to the medicine cat den. The cold breeze cut through Heatherheart's thin pelt effortlessly, carrying fear-scent from the nursery with it. Blood pounding in her ears, Heatherheart felt her paws instinctively bounding towards the scent.

"Thank Starclan you're here," Darkstripe greeted her at the entrance to the nursery, his whiskers twitching wildly. "Do you have anything else for the pain? I'm worried," he added quietly, his ears angled back towards where his mate lay. "Cloudsky won't admit she's in pain, but I can see it." Heatherheart allowed herself a friendly purr before pointing her tail towards a branch that had dislodged itself from the camp wall.

"That would do Cloudsky better than any herbs," seeing the doubt in Darkstripe's eyes, she brushed her tail across his flank comfortingly. "If I were to give her poppy seeds we wouldn't know when the kits were coming," she soothed, seeing the fur along Darkstripe's spine lay flat.

"You know best, Heatherheart." Darkstripe padded towards the twig, snatching it up in his strong jaws and sprinting back towards the nursery. Heatherheart followed him into the nursery slowly, knowing Darkstripe would need as much time as possible to get Cloudsky comfortable. Her ears twitched towards the camp entrance as the sound of Mudfur's paws echoed through the camp, the sweet scent of river water wafting off the moss.

"Have you started yet?" Mudfur questioned, his sides heaving from the run to the sweetest puddle of water on FireClan territory. Heatherheart simply shook her head, flicking her tail towards the nursery to signal her apprentice to follow her through the soft ivy growing on the entrance. Mudfur gently pushed his way past Heatherheart and placed the moss next to Cloudsky's muzzle, watching as the queen turned her head to the side and gave a half-hearted lick at the moisture.

"Place your paws on her stomach," Heatherheart instructed, positioning herself at the end of Cloudsky's nest. "How many kits do you feel?" Mudfur kneaded at Cloudsky's stomach, tail twitching

apologetically as she hissed in response. Darkstripe offered her the stick he had picked from outside the den, his tail drooping when his mate turned her head pointedly away from it.

"Four kits," Mudfur looked up, his eyes gleaming with excitement despite the obviously crackle of tension between Darkstripe and Cloudsky. "They're coming now, aren't they?" Heatherheart nodded, leaning forward and nipping gently at the sack of one kit as it slid out onto the nest around Cloudsky.

'Lick," Heatherheart shoved the kit towards Darkstripe, returning to Cloudsky's side as another kit slid into the nest. Mudfur watched Heatherheart place the kit gently beside her, giving it a quick lick before lowering her head and placing her ear against its chest. "Embertail, could you lick this one for me?" Embertail's sweet scent flooded over Mudfur, her orange-cream pelt brushing lightly against his as she rushed to Heatherheart. "Mudfur," she beckoned him over, pushing a kit towards him to lick.

"Heatherheart," Embertail whispered, her tongue sticking out of her mouth as if she was mid-lick. Her thin tail was flicking back and forth nervously. Heatherheart made her way to where Embertail crouched, Cloudsky's final kit clamped gently between her jaws.

"Well done, Cloudsky," Heatherheart mewed from her spot next to Embertail. "Have you thought of any names?" Cloudsky's head was on the side of her moss nest, her eyes filled with exhaustion and pride as she looked over her four tiny scraps of fur.

"I'll have to..." Cloudsky looked up to her mate, giving his side an affectionate flick with her tail, "*We'll* have to think of some names." Darkstripe looked up from the bundle of gray and white fur beneath him, the kit's tiny mouth gaping in a silent mew for food, his whiskers twitching wildly.

"I'm sorry, Cloudsky," Heatherheart broke the queen's gaze from her mate after a moment of silence. "She was just too weak..." Cloudsky's sky-blue eyes clouded with pain, her body straining with effort to get up to see her dead kit. "I'll bring her," Heatherheart mewed quickly. She picked the kit up and padded towards where Cloudsky lay, setting it down in the curve of her stomach.

"Oh my precious kit," Cloudsky murmured, pressing her nose into the kits soft gray fur, "You will be welcome in Starclan." Darkstripe leaned down as well, giving Cloudsky's ears a gentle lick to comfort her.

"What will they welcome her as?" Heatherheart inquired, her eyes traveling across the remainder of Cloudsky's kits wearily.

"Dustkit," Cloudsky meowed after a brief moment of pained thought. "Starclan will welcome her as Dustkit." Darkstripe gave a slight nod to approve the name, moving closer to his mate to mourn the loss of their kit together. The gently mewling of the remainder of her kits stirred Cloudsky from her daze, the warmth returning to her eyes as she looked over them.

"We should name this one Badgerkit," Darkstripe pointed his tail at the kit wiggling beneath him; "he's the largest of them." A loud purr erupted from Cloudsky's throat as Badgerkit weaseled his way from under Darkstripe and towards the scent of milk. Darkstripe lifted the kit over the side of the moss nest and placed him against Cloudsky's stomach, looking on affectionately as Badgerkit nuzzled against Cloudsky and began suckling. Embertail followed Mudfur to Cloudsky's side, gently placing the kit against Cloudsky's side and settling down beside Heatherheart.

"He will be called Black-kit," Cloudsky purred, rubbing the tip of her tail against the jet-black muzzle of the kit, "and you shall be Skunk-kit." Darkstripe nodded once again, approving the names his mate had picked.

Aside from the muffled mews of new kits, the nursery was silent. Each cat was fighting their own battle against mourning the loss of a clan kit, and welcoming the three new ones. Shaking her head, Heatherheart caught Darkstripe's eyes, seeing he was fighting the hardest against his sorrow.

"I'll take Dustkit out," Darkstripe broke the silence, gently nudging Badgerkit aside to pick up his unmoving sister. Heatherheart bowed her head as Darkstripe passed, Mudfur quickly followed her example. Mudfur briefly registered the sound of paw steps towards the nursery and the sound of mournful mews before he resumed

looking over Cloudsky's kits.

"They're all lovely kits," Embertail spoke loudly from beside Cloudsky, her heather-colored eyes brimmed with longing. "It makes me wish Spottedkit was still too small to be causing mischief," Heatherheart brushed her tail against Mudfur's shoulder, signaling that it was time for them to leave.

"I'll bring some borage by later," Heatherheart called as they left the nursery. She abandoned Mudfur at the entrance and trotting towards the den under the wooden ledge where Smokestar's was. He sat down, slowly, taking deep breaths to steady himself against the crashing waves of nausea.

After what seemed like a moon of waiting, Darkstripe returned through the camp entrance, his tail dragging against the cold ground. Brownclaw following behind him with a pained expression, the beginnings of vision-loss clouding his gaze slightly. Mudfur gave Brownclaw a tiny nod as he walked by, Brownclaw acknowledged him with a flick of his tail, but continued to trot towards the elders den.

"What's crawlin' in your pelt, Mudfur?" Sunpelt's fluffy tail brushed against his muzzle, "badger got your tongue?" Mudfur hesitated. "It's Cloudsky's kit, ain't it?" Sunpelt sat down beside Mudfur, rubbing her muzzle against his shoulder comfortingly. "There was nothin' you, or Heatherheart, could'a done differently that would change Dustkit's fate. She's huntin' with Starclan now."

"Thank you, Sunpelt. You always know what to say," Mudfur gave Sunpelt's ear a brisk lick. "Dustkit will never know leaf-bare hunger, or the wounds of battle... it's seems unfair to take a kit just born." Mudfur finished, gazing into Sunpelt's soft golden eyes and feeling his body relax.

"Don't you lose faith, dear Mudfur," she soothed, her gentle purr vibrating against Mudfur's chest. "Starclan have their reasons for everythin'," Sunpelt gave him a final lick before trotting off towards the pile of fresh-kill. Mudfur noticed Heatherheart and Smokestar standing side-by-side on the wooden ledge, Smokestar giving Heatherheart a brief nod before calling out for his clan to assemble.

Heatherheart jumped down, signaling for Mudfur to join her at the other side of the clearing.

"What did Smokestar say?" Mudfur questioned as he trotted over to his mentor, her tail twitching impatiently. Heatherheart shook her head, flicking her ears towards where Smokestar sat.

"Today we welcome three new kits into Fireclan," his voice rang through the clearing, quickly followed by excited mews of clan cats. "One kit is on her way to Starclan, however. We will sit vigil for Dustkit tonight." The excited mews had slowed, turning into to a few upset whispers, but no cat moved from their spot when Smokestar dismissed them.

"I'm going to check on Cloudsky," Heatherheart spoke up from beside him, her mew heavy with exhaustion. "Grab something from the fresh-kill pile. You earned it." She gave Mudfur a compassionate flick with her tail. "Not all births are like this..." Mudfur hardly heard her, and it seemed like he hadn't been meant to hear that.

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Heatherheart awoke to the sound of a kit mewling in her ear and the sweet scent of Cloudsky surrounding her. The queen's eyes were dark with worry. "Heatherheart," she mewed softly. "Black-kit's got a cough," Heatherheart was not surprised. with leaf-bare just around the corner more cats would be coming down with coughs.

"Where is he?" Looking around, Heatherheart could not locate where the mewling she had heard a moment ago had come from.

"Back in the nursery," Cloudsky didn't try to hide her tail as it twitched angrily. "What kind of mother do you think I am? It's cold enough to freeze *my* paws off," she snapped. Looking over Heatherheart, she realized the medicine cat's eyes were heavy with exhaustion. "Perhaps I should get Mudfur, you look worn out."

"No, I'm already up." Heatherheart arched her back in a quick stretch, feeling her spine loosening up and barely suppressing a content purr. "I'm sorry, Cloudsky, I didn't mean to imply you weren't a good mother," Cloudsky's head ducked, giving her chest

fur an embarrassed lick.

"I should get back to my kits; you'll be there soon, right?" Heatherheart nodded, watching Cloudsky give her pelt a quick shake to fluff it out before turning to face the cold wind that slapped against the medicine den's entrance. Picking her way carefully towards the back of the den Heatherheart grabbed a head of coltsfoot, missing Mudfur's extended paw by a hair.

Copying Cloudsky, Heatherheart fluffed her fur out and stepped out into the howling wind, the dark clouds above her threatening to pour freezing rain on the camp. Making her way to the nursery, she noticed the sun peeking out behind one of the dark clouds. *It must be sunhigh,* she sighed, annoyed with the hovering storm. Her paws quickened their pace as the sound of kit-cough hit her ears. The cough sounded bad enough to shake a full grown cat to their bones.

"Over here," Darkstripe called softly, trying his best not to wake Embertail in the nest next to Cloudsky.

"No need to be so quiet," Embertail spoke softly, drawing her tail protectively over Spottedkit's ears. "It's hard to believe the whole camp hasn't woken to the sound of that cough." Despite her angry tone, Heatherheart knew she was concerned; for both Cloudsky's kits and her own. Spottedkit slept soundly beneath Embertail's tail, twitching her paws as if she was chasing something in her dream.

"Could you chew this up for me, Darkstripe?" Heatherheart dropped the head of coltsfoot at his paws and turned her attention to Black-kit, who let out a violent cough and whimpered. "Place some of it on his tongue. Cloudsky," the queen turned her head to meet Heatherheart's gaze, "rub his throat with your paw when it's on his tongue. Hopefully he'll swallow some before his next coughing fit."

Embertail looked on intently as the two worked the rest of the coltsfoot into Black-kit's mouth, taking turns following Heatherheart's instructions until it was all gone. Heatherheart dragged her paws forward, settling herself beside Darkstripe and giving his shoulder a comforting lick.

"Starclan will protect him," she soothed, realizing she wasn't just

trying to comfort her kin. "They won't take another kit from you. I promise." Darkstripe leaned into Heatherheart's side, moving his tail gently over Black-kit and sighing.

"Starclan isn't this cruel." Embertail whispered from her nest, flinching away as Black-kit broke out in another coughing fit. "They can't be," she whispered.

"If Black-kit is anything like his parents, there's no doubt in my mind that he'll make a full recovery," Heatherheart looked up, spotting Bluewind trotting towards them, a mischievous glint in her brown eyes. "In fact, I'd think he'd outlive all of us, and *still* refuse to join Starclan when his time came." Heatherheart stifled an amused purr at the statement, knowing full well that that was the type of thing the clan had said about Darkstripe when they were kits.

"You *were* a sickly apprentice," Cloudsky purred, flicking Darkstripe's ear with her tail. "He'll pull through." Embertail had begun to purr loudly, the sound echoing through the small den and bringing a sense of peace to them all.

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Mudfur awoke to Heatherheart slipping back into her nest, her tail dragging a trail of dirt from the ground behind her. He could sense she wasn't in the mood for idle chit-chat. Giving his paws a quick lick; he lifted himself from his moss lined nest and arched his back in a luxurious stretch.

"Heatherheart," the soft voice of Smokestar called in. Mudfur crept past Heatherheart and met his leader's slim face at the entrance to the medicine den. "Mudfur," he sounded surprised. "Where's Heatherheart?"

"She just settled down," he flicked his tail back towards the den. Smokestar dipped his head to the side, as if questioning why Heatherheart would have been up most of the night, only to be answered a heartbeat later by a violent cough from the nursery.

"Just tell her I was around when she wakes," with that, Smokestar

turned and padded away towards Bluewind, the FireClan deputy. Mudfur nodded, immediately wondering why he had, since his leader was already long gone. Shaking the haze from his mind, he decided he would bring a head of coltsfoot to the nursery.

"Dustkit..." Heatherheart muttered in her sleep, throwing her head to the side and whimpering. Mudfur decided against waking her from her dream, stepping carefully past her towards the storage of herbs in the back of the den. After grabbing the coltsfoot, he retraced his steps, seeing Heatherheart tuck her nose under her tail and gave a content sigh before relaxing. Mudfur exited the den, suddenly realizing how cold it was, the cold wind piercing through his thin pelt effortlessly. He shook his fur until it was fluffed up to his satisfaction and sprinted to the nursery.

"Oh, Mudfur," Embertail greeted him, her honey-like scent traveling to his nose, "close the ferns, will you? It's cold out there." Mudfur jumped forward, feeling the ferns close gently on his tail. "Are you here to see Cloudsky? Black-kit's cough is getting worse," Embertail nodded towards the coltsfoot, "I see you're one step ahead of me." She purred, nudging Spottedkit back against the curvature of her stomach with her hind-leg.

"Black-kit," Cloudsky nosed her kit, "Mudfur!" Her mew was panicked, "Mudfur, he's getting cold!" She whipped her head around, glaring at Mudfur as he wound around her nest and to her kit. "Please StarClan; don't take Black-kit, too!" Cloudsky yowled loudly, burying her nose into Black-kit's fur and letting out a low wail.

Starbound Paws: Chapter 1

The paw steps of her mother were barely audible as she whisked out of the nursery, the birdsong incredibly heavy in the air, as well as the scent of growing things. Skunk-kit kept her eyes closed, well aware that Badgerkit sat alongside her fidgeting wildly. He was waiting for her to wake, his tail purposely flicking her ears and his paws working into the nest below them noisily.

“Skunk-kit,” the fidgeting had stopped. “Hey, its past sun high, you can’t sleep all day.” Badgerkit nudged her roughly, every inch of her wanting to cuff him roughly over the ear. Embertail gave an amused purr from her nest a few fox-lengths away from them before getting up and shaking the moss from her pelt.

“Best not wake her,” Embertail advised. “You know how grumpy Cloudsky gets; don’t you think Skunk-kit will be the same?” Badgerkit scoffed, nudging Skunk-kit once more. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you, little one.” Embertail padded over to where the two lay, giving Skunk-kit’s ear a quick lick. “I know you’re awake,” she murmured. Skunk-kit flicked her ears in acknowledgement, hearing another purr rumbling in Embertail’s throat. “Mischievous already, are we?”

“You *are* awake!” Badgerkit exclaimed, cuffing Skunk-kit’s ear playfully. “Come on already, let’s go explore!” Skunk-kit sighed, opening her eyes to the light-gray pelt of her brother, his black paws working furiously at their nest. Badgerkit’s jet-black eyes shone brightly as they stared at her, “come *on*!” he repeated. Skunk-kit heaved herself to her paws, giving her heavy pelt a rough shake and sat down, preparing to wash herself thoroughly. “You can wash later,” Badgerkit mewed impatiently.

“I’m not going out looking like a fluffed-up mouse,” Skunk-kit scoffed, returning to her wash. Badgerkit snorted angrily, but settled down beside her and began washing the top of her head. “You should wash yourself, mouse-brain,” Skunk-kit purred, trying to ignore how happy she felt at her brother’s gesture. He simply

twitched his ears, giving her head a final lick before leaning back on his hind-legs.

“You’re looking lovely, as usual, my kits.” Cloudsky had appeared at the entrance once more, smelling strongly of fresh-kill. “Badgerkit, you should groom yourself before you head out,” she scolded, padding over to give him a gentle lick. “It’ll be your first time meeting everyone; you don’t want to look like messy kits, do you?” Skunk-kit couldn’t help but notice her gaze turning towards Badgerkit.

“He was helping me groom,” Skunk-kit spoke up, surprising her mother and brother with the sudden confession.

“Well, isn’t that nice,” Cloudsky mused, though Skunk-kit could see she didn’t believe her. “Come here, Badgerkit.” He trudged over to where their mother had settled, letting her groom him to her satisfaction before wiggling out of reach.

“Can we go now?” His head whipped towards Skunk-kit, “or do you want to get me in *more* trouble?” Cloudsky let out an amused purr, giving Skunk-kit a gentle nudge out of her warm nest.

“Go on; go meet your clanmates,” her sky-blue eyes were rimmed with love. Badgerkit trotted out of the den, the smells of several cats overwhelming Skunk-kit as she tried to follow him out. “You’ll get used to it,” Cloudsky called from her nest. “Would you like me to come out with you?” Skunk-kit nodded, feeling her pelt burn with embarrassment.

“Well, well,” Darkstripe stood at the entrance of the nursery, his ears flicking towards the emerging kits. “Look who decided to meet their clan!” His words roused another cat from the pile of fresh-kill in the center of the camp, her golden fur shining brightly in the warm sun.

“Hello, young ‘uns,” she greeted them, her calm voice soothing Skunk-kit’s worries like a cold drink on a hot day. “I’m Sunpelt, what’re your names?” Skunk-kit noticed Badgerkit staring intently at Sunpelt, his eyes full of confusion.

“I’m Skunk-kit, and this is Badgerkit,” Skunk-kit replied quickly. With a fierce look at Badgerkit, she moved forward to give Sunpelt a quick sniff. “You smell sweet,” her eyes closed, trying to savor the delicious smell.

“Impressive,” Sunpelt purred, giving Skunk-kit’s ear a quick lick. “I was out helpin’ Mudfur and Heatherheart gather honey, I must’a have gotten some of it on my fur,” she looked over to where Badgerkit was sitting, his head titled to the side. Quicker than lightning, a blur of tan and white fur flashed past her, slamming into Badgerkit’s side and toppling him over.

“Got you!” Spottedkit’s paws were planted firmly on Badgerkit’s chest, a purr erupting from her own chest. “You look like you’ve got bees in your brain,” Skunk-kit couldn’t help but agree; the blank look Badgerkit gave Spottedkit was unlike him.

“Spottedkit,” a mew sounded from behind Skunk-kit. “You really shouldn’t play so rough,” Embertail had emerged from the dirt-place tunnel, her fur sleek from a recent grooming. “Badgerkit is many moons younger than you,” Badgerkit heaved upward, throwing Spottedkit off of him and stumbling to his paws.

“Badgerkit,” Darkstripe’s stern mew sounded from behind them. “Do you need to be sent back to the nursery?” Badgerkit shook his head, giving Spottedkit a mischievous glance before trotting off towards the scent of a new cat.

“Excuse me,” Skunk-kit mewed quietly, giving Sunpelt a respectful nod before following her brother. “Hello,” she yipped as they approached the cat, its snow-white ear flicking in acknowledgement.

“Hello, kits,” the old she-cat greeted them, her coal-black pelt still glossy from a recent grooming. The muddled brown pelt beside her stirred briefly and muttered something, returning to his loud snoring a moment later. “Wake up, you big lug,” her paw poked into the side of the brown pelt. “We have visitors,” with a purr, she returned her gray eyes back towards the kits. “I’m Snowear. This sleepy ball of fluff is Brownclaw,” she added with a flick of her tail towards him.

“I’m Badgerkit,” Badgerkit meowed happily, his eyes narrowing at the sight of Brownclaw’s twitching tail.

“I’m Skunk-kit,” Skunk-kit mewed quickly, giving her brother a hard shove before he could pounce. “Is that your den?” he inquired, leaning to the side to peer into the bracken-covered den. Snowear nodded, giving her shoulder a slow lick before struggling to her paws.

“This is the elder’s den,” she leaned in closer to the kits. “Don’t tell anyone else, but this den is the least drafty of them all,” Brownclaw snorted from beside her, his head still resting on his paws. “Over there is the warrior’s den,” Snowear carried on, ignoring Brownclaw’s intrusion. Her tail pointed towards another bracken-covered den, the sun above the hollow shining brightly through and revealing a flame-colored pelt in the back corner, dozing soundly. “There’s the apprentice’s den,” she nodded towards another den, this time covered in fronds, much like the nursery entrance Skunk-kit had grown used to. “And that’s – oh.” Skunk-kit looked up to where Snowear had been looking before she was cut off.

Near the back of the hollow was a wooden-ledge, its edges smoothed out by many moons worth of rains, a small hole in the wall right above where it stood. Sitting back on her hind-legs, she peered up and noticed a smoky-gray pelt trotting out, a darker gray pelt following, and bluish-gray pelt close behind.

“Who’re they?” Badgerkit questioned, nearly scaring Skunk-kit out of her fur. *I’d completely forgotten he was there!* She shook her head, looking up to Snowear expectantly, wanting to know as well.

“The one in front is Smokestar, he’s the clan leader,” Badgerkit looked up with admiration sparking in his eyes. “The one just behind him is Heatherheart, our medicine cat. The one just behind her is Bluewind, the deputy, and your mother’s sister.” Skunk-kit couldn’t help but feel like she’d seen Bluewind before, but quickly shook off the thought: There was no way she’d seen her before now, she hadn’t visited the nursery before.

“What’s going on,” Brownclaw had begun to stir, his mew laced with exhaustion. “Snowear?” his cloudy brown eyes were staring

towards the three cats sitting at the edge of the sunning-ledge.

“Nothing,” she padded over to her den-mate, laying her tail across his shoulders comfortingly. “Time for you kits to go back to the nursery,” Skunk-kit looked up, seeing the sun peering out at them from behind a large formation of clouds. Badgerkit was already scampering down the ledge, trotting confidently towards the nursery. “Go on, Skunk-kit,” Snowear gave her a gently shove towards the pathway down from the elder’s den.

Giving her chest fur a quick lick, she looked around for her brother, instead, seeing Spottedkit peeking into the nursery. Her tail was lashing to and fro, her hind-quarters wiggling playfully. She leapt back, barely dodging Badgerkit as he launched himself out of the fern-covered den and tumbling onto his side ungracefully. Spottedkit pounced, landing on Badgerkit’s flank and battering him with her hind paws.

“Why aren’t you playing?” Skunk-kit jumped at the mew behind her. Turning, she realized she was muzzle-to-muzzle with Heatherheart’s piercing emerald gaze. “Are you feeling sick?” She questioned, leaning forward and giving Skunk-kit’s ear a quick prod with her pink nose.

“No,” Skunk-kit muttered, her gaze traveling to the rolling bundle of cream and gray fur that was tumbling around the clearing. “Two on one isn’t fair, so I stay out of it,” Heatherheart scoffed, settling down beside Skunk-kit to watch the play-fight.

“That’s kind of you,” she mewed. “Have you asked any of the apprentices to play with you?”

“They don’t want to play with kits,” Skunk-kit mewed dejectedly.

“Skunk-kit,” Cloudsky called from the nursery entrance. “Badgerkit, it’s time to settle down.” Heatherheart’s tail flicked her shoulder before she stood, stretching luxuriously, and padded towards a nook in the stone wall. Badgerkit and Spottedkit had broken apart, both of their sides heaving from the fight. Skunk-kit bounded off towards the nursery, giving Badgerkit a flick with her tail before following her mother’s scent with a content purr.

Starbound Paws: Chapter 2

The sun was rising slowly over the top of the hollow, the birds not quite ready to begin their songs to announce morning to the clan. Badgerkit, however, was itching to go back out to discover more of the camp. He had barely been paying attention when Snowear was pointing out the dens to them the moon before. He watched with awe as Bluewind began ordering the clan cats into hunting and border patrols, her mew confident and her dark brown eyes shining with pride.

I'll be deputy someday; he thought fervently, his tail lashing impatiently as he realized he had not even been made an apprentice yet! A flash of golden fur caught his eye; Whitepaw was exiting a bracken-covered den in the corner of the hollow slowly. Her paws were dragging underneath her, the white blotch of fur on the underside of her belly skimming the floor below as she settled down to groom herself.

"Badgerkit," Spottedkit mewed, giving him a playful cuff over his ear. "You're zoning out again! Do you think Smokestar will give you your apprentice name if you can't notice a cat coming towards you?"

"Shut up," Badgerkit muttered. "You're not an apprentice, either, so stop acting like you're leader." If she had heard his retort, she didn't show it. She was staring expectantly at Smokestar as he padded out onto the wooden ledge in front of his den. His fur was freshly groomed, the sun hitting it and making his smoky-gray pelt look like it was basking in flames.

"All cats old enough to stalk their own prey assemble beneath the ledge for a clan meeting," Smokestar's mew rang clear through the

hollow. None of the cats had been sent out on patrol yet, and even Bluewind looked baffled as to why their leader had interrupted her. "I am aware that patrols should be out soon, but, before you all leave, I would like to welcome a kit into the clan as an apprentice." His eyes traveled down towards Badgerkit, and he felt his fur fluffing up proudly. "Spottedkit, please come forward," he beckoned the she-kit forward with his tail.

Badgerkit felt his fur grow hot with embarrassment when he realized Smokestar wouldn't have been talking to him, he wasn't even six moons old yet!

"Move over, you fluff-ball," Skunk-kit had emerged from the nursery, her sky-blue eyes dulled by exhaustion. *Huh!* Badgerkit scoffed, scooting over a bit to let Cloudsky pad out behind Skunk-kit without a problem. *Lazy ball of fur,* he thought sourly.

"I ask our warrior ancestors to look down on this kit," Smokestar began. "She has waited patiently for her sixth moon to come, and, now, we commend her as an apprentice in her turn. From this moment on, your name shall be Spottedpaw," his tail draped across Spottedpaw's shoulder, and Spottedpaw bowed her head in return. "Bluewind,' he beckoned his deputy forward. "You haven't mentored an apprentice since Yewtail, and now it is time for you to pass on your knowledge, skill, and patience," his mew sharpened, covering the brief flash of grief in his mew. "May StarClan bless you both, in training," he gazed briefly at Spottedpaw. "And mentoring," finally, his forest-green eyes rested on his deputy.

"Spottedpaw! Spottedpaw!" The clan bellowed, their yowls filling every corner of the hollow and echoing in Badgerkit's ears long after their mews had died down. Spottedpaw padded forward, touching her bright pink nose to Bluewind's affectionately.

"I wasn't expecting this," Bluewind began. "But I'm honored to have been chosen to mentor such a fine young cat," her gaze traveled over to Spottedpaw's mother, Embertail, who looked ready to burst with pride. Badgerkit looked on enviously as the clan cats crowded around Spottedpaw, giving her affectionate licks on her ears and shoulder.

"Do you want to play a game, Badgerkit?" Skunk-kit had spoken up from beside him, her black-and-white tail practically mimicking Badgerkit's impatient flicks.

"No," he growled, turning his back on his former friend, the clans praise filling his ears once more.

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Badgerkit had stalked away, the fur on his spine standing straight up, though Skunk-kit suspected that he wasn't aware of it. She returned her sky-blue gaze to where Spottedpaw was standing, meeting her sad amber gaze.

"Are you ready for a patrol, Spottedpaw?" Bluewind's mew broke Spottedpaw's gaze from Skunk-kit's, the excitement from moments ago returning.

"Really?!" Spottedpaw's paws worked furiously at the dirt, "right now?" Bluewind nodded, twitching her tail in the direction of Darkstripe and another cat, his black-and-white belt reminding Skunk-kit of Snowear.

"We'll take Darkstripe and Coalfur," Skunk-kit gave Coalfur another quick look, hoping she would remember his name. "Tigerjaw and Darkstripe will take their apprentices out for the other patrol, report back if you find anything unusual." Skunk-kit looked around for Tigerjaw, hoping to put a pelt to the name.

"Ready,?" The familiar mew of her father, Darkstripe, rang in her ear. Sitting calmly next to him was a fierce looking cat, his dark amber eyes looking over the camp with an emotion Skunk-kit couldn't quite place. Skunk-kit watched enviously as Lightpaw and Whitepaw approached the two warriors, their ears pricked up, and their paws twitching energetically.

"It'll be your turn soon enough," Cloudsky mewed in her ear; "you and Badgerkit mustn't be so angry that Spottedpaw moved on without you." Skunk-kit bowed her head in embarrassment, realizing the fur on her spine had been bristling. "You kits are my pride and joy; when your time comes, I hope you take full

advantage of it." Skunk-kit nodded, avoiding her mother's bright blue gaze, however soft it may be.

"Oh, Skunk-kit," her ears flicked up towards the mew, her eyes following soon after. Snowear was at the top of the small dirt hill on the side of the camp, clumps of moss still hanging messily from her un-groomed coat. "Brownclaw and I could use some help with our bedding, could we borrow your kit for a while, Cloudsky?"

"Yes, I think that'd be good," Cloudsky nosed Skunk-kit forward, "behave." She added sternly.

"I will," Skunk-kit trotted forward, avoiding Embertail, who had settled down in a patch of sunlight to groom her fur. Snowear was beginning to groom the bits of shriveled moss from her black fur, the small white patch on the tip of her ear catching Skunk-kit's eyes.

"There's a bit on my back there that I can't get," Snowear recaptured Skunk-kit's attention, her white ear flicking out of turn with her black one.

"I got it," Skunk-kit reached up, grabbing ahold of the dry ball with her teeth, careful to avoid breathing in the strands. Snowear continued to lick her fur, the blackened strands catching on her tongue as she dragged it down her pelt. Inside the den, Brownclaw was sleeping, his ragged breathing making Skunk-kit feel uncomfortable.

"Don't worry about him, he's just got a little cold," Snowear comforted, giving Skunk-kit an appreciative nod. "Thank you for helping me with the moss, the apprentices haven't gotten us new moss in quite some time..." her mew trailed off, as if she had suddenly realized what she was mewing about. "Not that they should bother themselves with us, of course, they're training to be our tooth-and-claws!"

"I can get you some," Skunk-kit offered, pointing her nose towards the nursery, "Badgerkit will help, too!" Snowear gave a content purr, licking the top of Skunk-kit's head affectionately. "You're sweet to offer," she purred, "and we would really appreciate it."

Skunk-kit nodded, turning tail and heading towards the nursery, "when you kits get back we'll tell you a story!" Now, full of excitement at the promise of a story, Skunk-kit ran the remainder of the distance.

"Badgerkit," she called in, poking her bright pink nose through the ferns and sniffing for her bother. "I know you're in there," she mewed, receiving a grunt in response.

"What," Badgerkit grunted, his paws treading heavily towards the entrance.

"Snowear needs to moss, I figured we could get it for them," Skunk-kit mewed quietly, suddenly aware of how much weight Badgerkit had on her.

"Fine," he padded off, his tail flicking in annoyance. Skunk-kit followed, her tail mimicking Badgerkit's annoyance, but for a different reason. *More like Badger-fit*, she thought to herself, giving a small snort of laughter. Despite Badgerkit's sour attitude, Skunk-kit was still excited for the story-reward, the elder's stories always being much more detailed than those her mother told her.

Turning her attention back to the forest around her, she became briefly aware of the smell of the dirt-place, trotting faster towards Badgerkit to close the gap and leave the smell behind. They were slowly approaching the moss-place, the smell of freshly scratched dirt reaching Skunk-kit a moment before she stepped into the sun-lit area. Her nostrils were filled with the smell of warmth and dirt, the combination nearly sweeping her right off her paws.

"H-hey," Badgerkit had stopped dead, his fur standing on end and his tail hastily slapping over Skunk-kit's muzzle. Pressing herself closer to Badgerkit, she peered past him, catching a glimpse of a bundle of bright red fur before Badgerkit fluffed his fur out.

"Run," he ordered under his breath, the bundle of red fur approaching slowly with a snarl. "Run!" Badgerkit whipped around, giving Skunk-kit a hard shove backwards before turning back towards the creature. Her face crammed into the moss that was beneath her feet a moment ago, the moss latching onto her

unevenly ruffled fur and wrapping around her body as she rolled.

"Help!" She yowled, hearing the sounds of claws scraping against trees, followed by an ear-splitting yowl. "Badgerkit!" Skunk-kit struggled against the moss that had wrapped firmly around her, the material that she had associated with the warmth of her mother and a full belly suddenly filling her with fear. Her paws worked furiously against the inner roll of moss, the flakes catching between her claws as she tore at them. Another yowl filled the air, but Skunk-kit couldn't make out which side it had come from. With a final push of brute force, the moss tore messily down the middle, the strands flying all over her pelt. "Badgerkit!"

Her brother was laying on the mossy floor a few paw-steps from where she had been encased in moss, his flank moving up and down with a large amount of effort on his part. Standing above him was not the red creature Skunk-kit had seen moments ago, but another cat. His black and gray pelt was fluffed up, his eyes switching from one side of the moss-den to the other.

"Who are you? Get away from him!" Skunk-kit hissed, launching herself forward and bowling over her brother's attacker.

"S-stop, what are you doing?" The cat's jet-black gaze entrapped Skunk-kit for a moment. She shook her head, suddenly realizing that the cat beneath her was *much* larger than she was. The cat had taken notice of this as well, heaving himself upward and shaking the frayed moss from his pelt. "I don't know how I got here, but, please-"

"It came from over here... *fox*!" Skunk-kit didn't recognize the mew, but the smell assured her it was a Fireclan cat. Her head turned back towards her brother, seeing that the mysterious cat had vanished, leaving her standing alone with the overwhelming smell of what her clanmates called a 'fox', with no trace of the clan cat to be seen.

Starbound Paws: Chapter 3

The clouds began to cover the sun once more, the dull rays creeping their way out of the nursery ferns and moving towards the sky. Skunk-kit felt the cold inching past her matted fur, the familiar smell of dirt beneath her warming her only slightly. Cloudsky's scent was fading from the nest Skunk-kit and Badgerkit had slept in in the previous moons, and Embertail's scent was completely gone from her old nest.

Flopping onto her side, Skunk-kit couldn't help but feel a twinge of loneliness. Badgerkit had spent the last three moon in the medicine cat's den, and Cloudsky barely left his side. Skunk-kit couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her mother eat, between delivering meals for Heatherheart and Mudfur and carrying out her warrior duties.

"Spottedpaw," Skunk-kit could hear Smokestar calling to the newest apprentice, "we're leaving, now!" Despite the tom's warning, Skunk-kit only heard the shuffling of Spottedpaw's paws on the dirt. "You must be ready for patrols before they go out," he scolded.

"Yes father," Spottedpaw mew sounded flustered, but Skunk-kit couldn't hear his response as a set of paws made their way towards the nursery.

"Why're ya sittin' here all on your lonesome?" Sunpelt had poked her black nose through, the white on her muzzle rubbing the wrong away against the ferns. "Come on out and see us!"

"I don't want to," Skunk-kit pouted, turning her head away from Sunpelt. "I got Badgerkit hurt..."

"Now you listen to me," Sunpelt's mew came firm, her tone almost immediately reverting to her soft spoken-self. "What happened to your brother was an accident," she pushed her way into the nursery, her golden pelt gleaming briefly in the sunlight. "Besides," she purred, giving Skunk-kit's ear a gentle lick, "what would he say if he

could see you now?"

"Groom yourself, mouse-fur..." Skunk-kit muttered, hearing Sunpelt give a snort of laugher, her honey-scented breath ruffling Skunk-kit's fur.

"How's about I help?" Sunpelt offered, giving Skunk-kit another gentle lick.

"Thank you," Skunk-kit mewed softly, secretly wishing that it was her own mother than was here comforting her. Sunpelt settled down beside her, giving the spot behind Skunk-kit's ear a rough lick, taking a nasty knot with her tongue. As Sunpelt continued her way down Skunk-kit's spine, Skunk-kit could feel her own eyes struggling to stay open. The light shining through the nursery's parted ferns warming her body as she dozed off, with Sunpelt's purr rumbling gently against her side.

-

Badgerkit awoke to the muttering of the older cats around him, his mother one of them. They were discussing his injuries, as they did every day when they thought he had dozed off. Heatherheart motioned for Mudfur to be silent, pointing her tail towards where Badgerkit lie, his black-as-night eyes staring straight at them.

"Badgerkit, you're awake," Cloudsky purred, trotting over to give his ear a lick. Badgerkit avoided it, as he had been for the past moon, and resumed staring at Heatherheart.

"When will I be better?" He demanded, gathering up his strength and pushing himself into a sitting position. "I'm sick of this nasty, old medicine den!" Mudfur's ears flicked angrily, his eyes traveling sideways to assess his mentor's reaction.

"Soon, little one, we are working to get you better as-"

"Soon? Skunk-kit will be made an apprentice before I'm allowed out of here!" Badgerkit interrupted, knowing that his words were hurting his mother, but it was too late to stop now. "If I can move, I can leave!" Badgerkit hauled himself up, hitting his head off the

roof of the medicine cat's den in the process. "See?!" He hissed triumphantly.

"You shouldn't-" Heatherheart shook her head, giving Mudfur a sideways glance.

"Try to walk, Badgerkit," she encouraged, sitting down and observing him curiously. Badgerkit stepped forward, feeling a sharp pain blossoming up his forepaw, but he forced himself to take another step. The same pain spread once more, making his chest ache and his head dizzy. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," he responded through gritted teeth, working slowly towards where Heatherheart sat at the entrance of the medicine cat den. Step after agonizing step Badgerkit felt as though his paws were going to fall off, his whole body trembling with effort now.

"Badgerkit..." Cloudsky watched her kit struggle with every step, too proud to admit he was in pain. Her sky-blue eyes followed Badgerkit carefully, glancing to Heatherheart and briefly registering the intrigued look in her eyes.

"There, see?" Badgerkit had reached where Heatherheart and Mudfur sat, holding his head high. Heatherheart nodded, looking down towards Badgerkit's paws before reaching out one paw, effortlessly unbalancing him. Badgerkit hit the solid dirt floor with a loud thud, his side aching from the impact.

"Why did you do that?!" Cloudsky hissed, rushing to Badgerkit's side and nosing his ear.

"I will let you know when you're ready to leave," Heatherheart mewed calmly, returning her paw to its previous position. Badgerkit stayed lying down, his breath coming out in ragged puffs, and his fur hot with shame.

"Could you have made your point without hurting him?" Cloudsky felt Heatherheart's eyes on her, the knowing, green gaze staring her down.

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Skunk-kit felt a breeze against her fur, the sun no longer warming her as the cold night air cut through her pelt effortlessly. Sunpelt was no longer up against her, the all too familiar ache of loneliness in her heart pounding through her body. Skunk-kit stopped, suddenly realizing that she could no longer smell Sunpelt's honey-like scent.

"Come now, little one," Skunk-kit raised her head, squinting against the star-bathed figure of a cat. "You must wake, we have much too tell you, but very little time."

"... Who are you?" She questioned, seeing the cat's whiskers twitching with amusement.

"You would not know me, little one, for I have been one with the sky for moons..." The starlight flashed bright for a brief moment, almost immediately dulling once more. "Time is of the essence," the cat mewed, her forest-green eyes shining, "you must ask Spottedpaw to show you her spot."

"Spot? What do you mean?" The light dimmed, the starry cat touching Skunk-kit's nose with her own before fading completely, leaving Skunk-kit to stare after her in amazement.

"Skunk-kit?" A nose poked through the ferns, the white muzzle of Embertail following closely. "Have you eaten?" Skunk-kit shook her head, raising to her paws and trotting towards where Embertail stood, her amber eyes looking on worriedly. She ignored the look, her head still lingering in the dream from just moments ago; the starry cat had shared a secret with her!

"All cats old enough to stalk their own prey assemble beneath the ledge for a clan meeting," Skunk-kit looked up, catching the forest-green gaze of their leader, Smokestar. His mew rang through the hollow, summoning cats from every corner of camp to his ledge. "Heatherheart," he called, the medicine cat exiting her den with Mudfur and Cloudsky in tow at his mew. "How are we sitting?" Heatherheart simply nodded, her muzzle turning back towards the entrance to her den and mewing something Skunk-kit couldn't make out.

Moments later she spotted the familiar pelt of her brother trudging out from the den, his paws dragging against the ground with each step. His face was plastered with pain, but his eyes sparkled with determination. Badgerkit moved towards where Skunk-kit had sat down, his fur looking as if it had been freshly groomed. *Oh no,* Skunk-kit hissed under her breath, realizing why she had been lured from her den.

"Today, we celebrate the morn that Badgerkit took his first step towards recovery," the clan called their approval, the mew of Cloudsky standing out. "Hunting has been well, and we have been blessed with the knowledge of Sunpelt's coming kits," more excited mews rose into the air. "Today," Smokestar looked down towards Skunk-kit and Badgerkit, their pelts brushing together as the jittered, "these two take their first steps into apprenticeship."

"We finally made it," Badgerkit hissed under his breath, "deputy, here I come!"

"I ask our warrior ancestors to look down on these kits," Smokestar began. "They have waited patiently for their sixth moon to come, and, now, we commend them as an apprentice in their turn," Smokestar leapt off his ledge, padding up to where Badgerkit sat patiently. "From this moment on, your name shall be Badgerpaw," his tail draped across Badgerpaw's shoulder, and he bowed his head in return. "Coalfur," he mewed, the black and white tom stepping toward proudly, "you have yet to mentor an apprentice, but your ferocity when it comes to defending your clan is unmatched."

"Nice to meet you, Badgerpaw," Coalfur welcomed him; stepping forward and giving Badgerpaw's shoulder an affectionate lick.

"Now," Smokestar turned his gaze towards Skunk-kit, who had given herself a few licks to soothe her excitedly ruffled fur. "From this moment on you shall be known as Skunkpaw," his tail draped across Skunkpaw's shoulder, and Skunkpaw bowed her head respectfully. "The spark of the bravest warrior shines within you, and I have thought hard on who shall mentor you," Skunkpaw felt her paws shaking nervously as she gazed across the river of eyes staring at her. "I have decided to take on your training."

The excited mews rose once more, chanting the names of the newest apprentices as they gathered. Skunkpaw could barely hear them over the furious hiss of Badgerpaw beside her. The other cats took no notice, however, giving Skunkpaw and Badgerpaw welcoming mews before beginning to disperse.

"Training will begin at sun-high," Smokestar broke her from her daze, "there is already a nest set for you in the apprentice's den, courtesy of Spottedpaw." His mew was proud, his green eyes switching between Skunkpaw and Badgerpaw. "Rest well tonight," he advised, giving Skunkpaw's shoulder the ritualistic lick. Skunkpaw bowed her head in return, keeping her head down until she heard the heavy paw steps of her brother limping towards the apprentice den.

Starbound Paws: Chapter 4

Badgerpaw settled into his mossy nest angrily, his tail lashing to and fro. His body stiffened as he realized how close he was to hitting Whitepaw, who was sleeping soundly a tail-length away in his own nest. Silently seething, Badgerpaw placed his paws on the rim of the nest, placing his chin on his paws and looking out of the fronds guarding the den.

His eyes were growing heavy, but two cats stirring outside the apprentice den kept him from succumbing to sleep. Squinting, he could make out the black and white pelt of his sister and the creamy pelt of Spottedpaw. *What are they up to?* Badgerpaw wondered, leaning forward in an attempt to make out what they were talking about.

"H-how did you know about that?" Spottedpaw's surprised mew was loud, but she adjusted herself and looked around. "No one..." her head turned away from the apprentice den, obscuring Badgerpaw's hearing. "I'll take you..." *That's it*, Badgerpaw hissed inwardly. He lifted himself from his nest, cursing his temporary awkward limp, as it made him much more noticeable. *I'll wait and follow their scents,* he settled right near the den entrance, seeing Skunkpaw's tail disappear into the dirt-place tunnel.

"Badgerpaw?" Lightpaw hissed, nearly jumping out of his fur at the sight of his new den mate. "What in Starclan's name are you doing there?" Badgerpaw shifted to the side as Lightpaw budged into the den, his tail still fluffed up from Badgerpaw's unintentional scare.

"Sorry," he apologized quietly, hoping Lightpaw would take it and not press on about why he was sitting here.

"Whatever," Lightpaw sighed. He slogged over to the nest next to Whitepaw and plopped down with a huff. "Scared me out of my fur," he growled under his breath. Badgerpaw turned his attention back to the fading scents of Skunkpaw and Spottedpaw, lifting himself up and limping after the trail as fast as his paws would move.

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"Are you sure you know where you're going," Skunkpaw asked tentatively.

"Do you want me to take you there or not," Spottedpaw mewed quietly, but Skunkpaw could see her fur standing up. Skunkpaw followed her carefully, the forest still foreign to her, and the darkness surrounding them making it much harder. Dodging around another tree root, Spottedpaw came to a halt, smelling the air and giving a satisfied nod. "We're here," she mewed, pushing her way inside a flower bush, her cream and orange tail looking as if it had been sucked into the bush.

Skunkpaw followed, finding that entering the bush was much easier than it had looked when Spottedpaw had done it. "So why is this place..." Skunkpaw trailed off, suddenly aware of the dimly lit area around her. Brightly colored flowers were scattered around the inside of the bush, their colors slightly dulled by the darkness outside. "Wow," she breathed eventually.

Skunkpaw took in the sight, smelling deeply at one flower and sneezing loudly when the pollen invaded her nostrils. Another scent hit her nose, the tangy smell feeling familiar but she couldn't quite put her paw on what it was. Ignoring it for now, she pushed past Spottedpaw and into the surprisingly wide interior.

"There you are," Spottedpaw mewed. Skunkpaw looked up at her friend, wondering how Spottedpaw had managed to lose her in such a small area... *that scent again!* "Who's there?!" Skunkpaw hissed, lowering herself against the plush grass.

"You brought someone?" A mew asked through the bush, not daring to enter.

"This is Skunkpaw," Spottedpaw comforted, "she said she had to see this spot." The northern side of the bush rustled, revealing the black and gray muzzle of a cat much larger than Skunkpaw and Spottedpaw put together. "This is Ravenleaf," she introduced the cat, who gave a curt nod.

"How can you meet a cat from another clan?" Skunkpaw questioned, looking from Spottedpaw to Ravenleaf, receiving a curious stare in return from Spottedpaw. "I thought... I thought you liked Badgerpaw!"

"I do like Badgerpaw," Spottedpaw admitted, her head tilting to the side. "I don't get why you're so upset, Skunkpaw." Furious, Skunkpaw felt her fur standing on edge, her tail lashing angrily. "You don't even know why he's here..."

"You haven't been to any gatherings," Ravenleaf observed, "you must be a new apprentice." There was a hint of a threat in his mew. Skunkpaw forced herself to relax slightly, knowing that this was not a fight that she would win. Fury fading from her sight, she got a clearer look at the cat, the black and blotchy gray markings on his pelt striking her as familiar.

"...Have I seen you before?" Ravenleaf's ears shot up in surprise, looking from Spottedpaw to Skunkpaw suspiciously. "I swear I've seen you somewhere before..." everything clicked, her mind being thrown back to the frightening encounter with a fox in the moss-den. "I have! You were in the moss-den when my brother got attacked!"

"What? No, I wasn't," Ravenleaf denied, his black eyes glittering nervously. "There are foxes around here?" He asked, attempting to cover his brief nervousness.

"Listen," Spottedpaw intervened, "as much as I love a petty squabble, you should get what you need and go." Ravenleaf looked surprised once more, but nodded after a moment, making his way towards the outer ring of flowers attached to the bush.

"What's he doing?" Skunkpaw questioned, watching Ravenleaf nip a flower from the stem and placing it gently on the ground. The

process seemed painstaking, but he was doing it was finesse and infinite patience.

"Ravenleaf's from Windclan," Spottedpaw sat down, giving her fur a quick lick. "Since they're out on the moor, they don't have very many flowers."

"So he picks flowers to... give to elders?" Skunkpaw wasn't quite following, but she was fascinated by Ravenleaf's gentle removal of the delicate petals.

"Since they don't have many flowers," Spottedpaw resumed her explanation, "they don't get bees, and, therefore, they don't have honey." Everything was settling into place, turning Skunkpaw's pelt as hot as a green-leaf sun. She sat silently, watching Ravenleaf gather a nice mouthful of flowers and place them in a pile.

"This should be good for the next moon," he gave a satisfied purr; "we really owe you one."

"I'll hold you to that," Spottedpaw purred in return, giving Ravenleaf a farewell wave with the tip of her tail.

"Oh," Ravenleaf mewed, his mouth hovering above the flowers. "I have a brother, Tinybreeze; you might have seen *him* at your 'moss-den'." With that, he gently picked up the flowers and exited the bush, his tangy scent following closely.

"Spottedpaw, I'm..."

"Don't worry about it," she replied coldly, jerking her head towards the southern part of the bush. "We should get going." Skunkpaw followed, keeping her head down to avoid the bushes, and Spottedpaw's harsh gaze.

-

Badgerpaw couldn't help his fur bristling angrily; *they were meeting another clan cat!* He didn't know who the cat was, as he had arrived much too late to catch a glimpse. Lashing his tail, he limped back towards the camp, following the scents of Spottedpaw and Skunkpaw to help his paws find the path. *I'll show them*, he growled

inwardly, picking up his pace.

Badgerpaw's paws were burning with the effort, but he was glad he could finally feel his muscles rippling under his pelt. Bounding forward, he ignored the pain that was settling into his innards, and the rapidly increasing urge to stop and vomit.

"Intruder!" He yowled; bursting into the clearing like his pelt was on fire. Cats were stirring, the night-watcher, Coalfur, pushed past Badgerpaw and sprinted towards Smokestar's den. Tigerjaw was the first to exit the warriors den, his massive figure growing even bigger with his pelt fluffed in anger.

"Lead me to it!" He spat, looking around wildly, hazel eyes blazing with fury.

"Now, now," Smokestar had exited his den, his drowsy tone making Tigerjaw's pelt increase in size once more. The other cats in the camp had exited their dens, and Badgerpaw watched complacently as Skunkpaw and Spottedpaw crept from the apprentice den. "Where was the intruder, young Badgerpaw?"

"Out near the..." the surrounding features were a blur to him, the darkness and unfamiliarity of the forest leaving him with no landmarks to accurately describe the place. "Where the big flower bush is," he mewed uncertainly, looking around for someone to help him with a location.

"Near the Earthclan border!" A mew sounded to his side, catching his ear. "I know where it is," he turned, catching the furious gaze of Spottedpaw. "Skunkpaw, come on!" His sister jumped to her feet, gazing after Spottedpaw in bewilderment.

"Wait!" Smokestar shouted after them, not succeeding in turning them around. "Tigerjaw, Bluewind, follow them," the two cats nodded, pelting after the two apprentices. "Badgerpaw..." Smokestar began. "Could you explain what you were doing so far from the camp?" Swallowing the lump in his throat, he nodded, slowly realizing that all the cats in the camp he had awoken were waiting for his response.

Starbound Paws: Chapter 5

"Spottedpaw, wait!" Skunkpaw was gasping for breath. Spottedpaw was running impossibly fast, her paws naturally moving along the roots and plants scattered among the darkened ground. She wasn't sure why her fellow apprentice had taken off at the drop of a mouse, but every hair on her pelt had screamed for her to follow. Now she was racing through an unfamiliar forest, the pounding of paws drawing closer with each step.

Without warning, a body slammed into Skunkpaw's side, her breath leaving her body in a pained gasp. "Stop!" Bluewind had pinned Skunkpaw to the ground, her freshly sharpened claws poking out of her paws and teetering against Skunkpaw's chest. "Tigerjaw, I've got Skunkpaw!" A loud grunt sounded beside them, but had already begun to fade away as it reached them. "What in Starclan's name are you doing?!" She questioned, her mud-colored eyes staring intensely at Skunkpaw's.

"I... I wanted to help," Skunkpaw lied, thinking of how much trouble Spottedpaw would be in for her meeting with Ravenleaf.

"You could've helped by staying put," Bluewind hissed angrily. "Cloudsky is probably out of her skull with worry!" Skunkpaw shrunk back, the hot breath of the Fireclan deputy on her face furthering her worry for Spottedpaw. With a sigh, Bluewind stepped to the side, allowing Skunkpaw to roll back to her feet and shake the dirt from her pelt. "You're all still in trouble, but..." she leaned forward, "Smokestar was right to take you as his apprentice."

Hot with embarrassment, Skunkpaw looked down at her paws. She knew the only reason she had chased Spottedpaw was to see what she was doing, not to help locate the intruder. *We were the ones that brought the intruder, anyway*... Bluewind was staring intently towards where Spottedpaw and Tigerjaw had disappeared, her ears twitching with each crackle of greenery.

"What did you find?" Bluewind asked, rising to her paws. Skunkpaw looked around, giving the air a tentative sniff to see who Bluewind was talking to.

"A lost kit and a dead trail," a mew sneered beside her, sending chills down Skunkpaw's side. "Clearly, we're giving out apprentice names too soon." Tigerjaw had padded into the clearing; his eyes brimmed with rage and nostrils flaring. Spottedpaw stood beside him, one paw hung at her side and her eyes at the ground.

"Smokestar's not going to be happy," Bluewind sighed, nudging Skunkpaw back towards camp. "Let's get back, you've both got explaining to do."

-

"We're waiting," Smokestar mewed calmly, but Badgerpaw could tell he was ten shades of furious.

"I... I went out to make dirt and I smelled something odd," he began, hearing Lightpaw snicker from his spot near the apprentice den.

"Smelled something odd at the dirt place, what a mouse-brain," a stern glare from Coalfur silenced him.

"I followed it, and I found a bush that smelled like the border," a brief glance at Smokestar revealed nothing. Badgerpaw shifted on his aching paws for what seemed like moons before Smokestar jumped down, padding forward to look into Badgerpaw's eyes.

"Is that so?" Badgerpaw nodded, staring back at the calm green orbs. "Tempting as it may be to lie to save your own pelt," he began after a moment. "Lies only lead to more lies." His nose was barely a hair-length from Badgerpaw's nose. "I cannot command liars... so I'll ask once more. Is that so?" He repeated the question, his eyes challenging Badgerpaw to speak up.

For a moment, he *was* tempted to spill what he had seen and heard, but there were too many blank spots in his story. How could he possibly tell Smokestar what he knew, knowing how incriminating it would sound? "That's what happened," he mewed, holding

Smokestar's gaze with as much strength as he could muster.

After a moment of quiet contemplation, Smokestar nodded. "Very well," he turned, his gray pelt turning starry in the moonlight. "Return to your dens, patrols will start at sun-high." Badgerpaw felt all of strength draining, his paws giving way beneath him and lowering him against the packed dirt. He sat there for what seemed like ages, trying to stop his heart from beating out of his chest.

The camp entrance rustled, the muscular frame of Tigerjaw appearing in the darkened clearing. "To your nests," Bluewind ordered, nodding towards Smokestar. Skunkpaw and Spottedpaw entered the clearing, and Badgerpaw noticed that Spottedpaw was limping slightly, but Badgerpaw could still see the anger burning in her eyes.

"You go as well, Badgerpaw," Smokestar mewed, turning around and padding back into his den. Bluewind and Tigerjaw ascended the small hill leading to Smokestar's den, Tigerjaw's tail lashing wildling behind him. Badgerpaw felt sleep tugging at his paws, and he let them lead him back to the apprentice den. He nudged his way behind the fronds and narrowed his eyes. After a moment, Badgerpaw's eyes adjusted to the darkness and he was able to make his way towards his moss nest.

"I can't believe you did that," Skunkpaw hissed as he neared. Ignoring his sister, Badgerpaw flopped down into his nest, placing his paws on the outer rim and resting his chin on them. Skunkpaw gave an angry grunt from beside him, pointedly standing and turning herself away from Badgerpaw. *First day being an apprentice*, he sighed inwardly, *and we've already gotten in trouble. How am I supposed to become deputy at this rate?* Hopelessness overwhelmed him, and Badgerpaw could do nothing but close his eyes and hope for sleep.

-

"Rise 'n shine, young 'ins," Sunpelt's cheery mew sounded from beside Skunkpaw. "Smokestar wants to see ya before ya head out," her golden head disappeared from the entrance, leaving behind the pleasant scent of honey. Skunkpaw rose, stretching each leg in turn

before settling down to wash the moss from her fur. Badgerpaw stood up beside her, exiting the den without a word.

On the other side of the den, the cream and white pelt of Spottedpaw was stirring. Skunkpaw avoided her gaze, well aware that Spottedpaw's hazel eyes were burning into her side. "You can wash later," Spottedpaw mewed, stomping out of the den. Skunkpaw followed, grumbling silently to herself.

"There you are," Smokestar greeted her, his gaze grazing over the three apprentices. "Next time I expect you to be awake before it's time to leave." His mew was firm, and his eyes gave nothing away. "Last night's adventure will not be ignored," beside her, Spottedpaw groaned. "Although you are my daughter, you must be treated like any other member of this clan. Therefore, you are all being assigned a den to clean. Moss must be taken out and replaced with dry moss, and the elder's must be taken care of. Spottedpaw, you are to clean the warrior's den, Skunkpaw, the apprentice's den, and Badgerpaw the nursery."

"There's no one in the nursery," Badgerpaw mewed, looking sideways towards the gentle fronds covering the den.

"Sunpelt will be moving in soon, and she will expect feathers lining her nest," Smokestar countered. "However, if that does not keep you occupied, I can make other arrangements."

"No thank you," he muttered, looking down towards his paws.

"After we finish are we going to explore the forest?" Skunkpaw asked, her paws fidgeting excitedly beneath her.

"No," Smokestar turned, signally with his tail for his patrol to join him. "Until you start acting like apprentices, not kits, you will stay in camp." Skunkpaw's tail dropped against the dirt floor, a small cloud being thrown upward. "If you need to leave the camp, you will ask a warrior to escort you." Smokestar padded towards the entrance, the bodies of Heatherheart and Coalfur joining him. "Oh," he called, turning his head. "You're forbid from eating until everything has been taken care of."

The three apprentices sat in the middle of the clearing, watching the small patrol exit the camp, the tips of their tails flicking the side of the entrance as they went. Freshly caught mouse was tickling Skunkpaw's nose, making her belly growl with hunger.

"The sooner we start, the sooner we'll finish," Spottedpaw murmured beside her. Tail drooping, she made her way towards the warrior's den, exchanging glances with Sunpelt ask she padded out. Badgerpaw make his way to the nursery without a word, his gray tail being sucked into the darkness as he entered. Skunkpaw sighed, feeling the agitation of both the cats pricking in her fur.

The camp entrance rustled, the lithe bodies of Lightpaw and Whitepaw trotting through. Their pelts gleamed in the sunlight, but it was the excitement in their eyes that made Skunkpaw's pelt prickle. "Great job today," Darkstripe mewed, giving Lightpaw's ear a nudge. "Get something to eat," he advised, nodding to Skunkpaw as he passed.

"It feels great to be out hunting," Lightpaw mewed past his shrew, pointedly looking Skunkpaw in the eye with a cocky grin. "Some of us really are meant to be apprentices!"

"Don't get too full of yourself," Tigerjaw growled, making Lightpaw's tail drop. "Your crouch could have been tighter, and your paw-steps lighter." He padded past them, dropping his fat pigeon off at the kill-pile and making his way to the warriors den. Skunkpaw ignored the looks being thrown at her by the two apprentices and made her way to the apprentice den.

The stink of old moss made her nose tingle, a sneeze lingering at her nose-tip for a moment. Shuttering the sneeze away, she bundled the moss in a pile and pushed it towards the entrance. The frayed bits caught under her claws as she pushed them, but she forced herself to ignore them. *No point in taking them out just to get more in...* she sighed, pushing the moss out into the sunlight.

Rolling the moss towards the dirt-place exit, she could see the unwashed pelt of her brother picking over the kill-pile. Before she could call out to him, his head surfaced, a mouthful of pigeon feathers crammed in his mouth. Holding back a laugh, she could

make out the golden pelt of Sunpelt fidgeting with the fronds outside the nursery.

"Over here will be good," she called to Badgerpaw. "I'd like to line my own nest, just make sure you take out the old bits!" Badgerpaw nodded in acknowledgement, taking the feathers to the entrance and dropping them. He rolled a small rock over them to keep them in place, and then returned to cleaning out the old moss from the nursery. Shoving her own ball of moss across the clearing, Skunkpaw returned her gaze to the dirt-place exit.

The stink wafting off the exit sent a shiver down her spine. She couldn't help but wonder if there was a way to disguise the smell. Shaking away the thought, she pushed the moss out, dumping it in a small ditch to the right of the dirt-place. Her claws slipped out, the large pieces of moss wedged between them being pushed out, but Skunkpaw realized she was in for a mossy treat next time she washed.

Starbound Paws: Chapter 6

Hunger gnawed at Badgerpaw's stomach. His pelt was still unwashed from that morning, but he still had not had time to deal with the tangled mess. The nursery had been cleaned out and Sunpelt had finally chosen a good spot for her nest. Soft pigeon feathers lined the freshly laid moss, making it the most comfortable nest Badgerpaw had set his eyes on. Next up was the elders den.

"Mudfur?" Badgerpaw called into the medicine den, receiving a muffled grunt in response. "I need mouse bile for the elder's ticks," he shouldered his way inside the den. Mudfur was at the far end of the den, his patchy brown fur catching in the small beam of light streaming through the roof. "I can come back," he mewed.

The brown body dislodged itself from the rock wall, a small wad of moss in his jaws. "No, I've got some right here," he trotted over to where Badgerpaw sat. "Remember to carry it with your mouth open, and don't let it touch your tongue!" Mudfur gently laid the putrid smelling moss at his feet, "you'd taste it for the next moon!" Whiskers twitching with amusement, Mudfur turned back towards the leaf storage.

"Thanks," Badgerpaw muttered. He gingerly hooked his teeth in a dry part of the moss, making sure to keep the sides of his mouth wedged open. *At least the smell made my stomach stop growling*, he thought, sighing inwardly. Maybe the elders would be kind enough to share their prey with him. He padded up the small dirt pile leading to Smokestar's den, taking a sharp turn at the top towards the elder's den.

"I smell tick relief!" Snowear purred as Badgerpaw approached. "Just in time, I can feel a ripe one on the back of my neck," Badgerpaw groaned through the moss. Looking over to the unmoving body of Brownclaw, Badgerpaw felt a pit forming in his stomach. "Oh, he's fine; the big lug just doesn't want to be checked. He thinks he can do it himself," Snowear struggled to her paws and limped over to Brownclaw, giving him a gentle lick to rouse him.

"I'll start on you, then," Badgerpaw mewed through the bundle of moss. Taking it over to where Snowear sat, he placed it gently beside her silky black pelt. He felt around for the tick that Snowear had mentioned, feeling the slick body of an over-engorged tick. "It's a big one," he murmured.

"It's been there for some time, I just didn't want to bug you apprentices," she purred. "I know you're busy hunting and training to keep us bone-bags safe and warm." Badgerpaw kept silent, placing the mouse-bile on the tick and latching onto it with his teeth. With a rough tug, it dislodged, a small spurt of blood covering Badgerpaw's face. "Ow!" Snowear flinched, her smooth fur beginning to ruffle.

"Sorry," he apologized. Placing the moss at his feet once more, he ran his paws over Snowear's pelt, not feeling any more ticks on her. "I think you're done," he mewed.

"I'll check you for fleas," a voice mewed from the entrance. Looking up, Badgerpaw was surprised to see the creamy pelt of Spottedpaw standing there. "Start checking Brownclaw," she ordered, making Badgerpaw's fur stand up. *Whatever,* he hissed inwardly, *I'm in enough trouble, so I'm not going to argue.*

Straining to make out anything on Brownclaw's pelt, Badgerpaw became faintly aware of Spottedpaw's scent enveloping him. He was tossed back to his nursery days, where he and Spottedpaw would play catch-the-tail all day long. "Would you two like to hear a story?" Snowear offered, looking over to Badgerpaw.

"Sure," Spottedpaw answered between her teeth. Her eyes were shinning excitedly, despite the flea that was being crushed between her teeth. "Could you tell us about Yewtail?" She asked, cracking another flea body.

"Oh, Yewtail," Snowear sighed. "He was a brave cat," she began, "he wasn't afraid of anything. Foxes, badgers, even twolegs!" Brownclaw stirred underneath Badgerpaw, his ears flicking in turn. "As you know, he's no longer with us," Spottedpaw nodded.

"Smokestar mentioned Bluewind mentored him when he made me

an apprentice," she mewed.

"She did," Snowear nodded, "he was a fast learner."

"Real shame he couldn't keep his curiosity under control," Brownclaw hissed between gritted teeth. Badgerpaw was surprised by the harshness of his tone. Snowear's ears flattened, but she said nothing. "The poor fool walked right into a monster's path," Badgerpaw felt a tick touch his paws. "Crushed him like a bug," Badgerpaw saw Spottedpaw flinch out of the corner of his eye.

"That couldn't have been his fault," Spottedpaw murmured.

"You're right," Snowear comforted. "Yewtail just wasn't cautious enough on that day," Brownclaw grunted as Badgerpaw pulled a tick from his hindquarters. "I know Tigerjaw and Embertail miss him dearly."

"I don't think Tigerjaw cares," Spottedpaw hissed.

"Now why would you think that?" Snowear inquired, looking the apprentice up and down.

"He's heartless," she spat, "all he does is look over all of us like we're prey! He's too obsessed with himself to care about anyone else," Snowear struggled to her paws, shifting herself over beside Spottedpaw.

"Tigerjaw was the one who found his brother on that path," Snowear murmured. "It would tear any cat apart to see their family like that." Spottedpaw remained silent, but looked down at her paws to avoid Snowear's gaze. Badgerpaw finished looking over Brownclaw for ticks and sat back. *What would I do if I found Skunkpaw like that?* The thought scared him to his core.

"I-I have to go," he mewed under his breath. Leaving the wad of moss behind, he rushed out of the den, looking frantically for the black and white pelt of his sister. *We can't be like this,* he hissed at himself, *who knows if we'll see each other again?* The pelt he had been looking for appeared from the camp entrance, with the light blue and white pelt of his mother following. "Skunkpaw," he called.

"What now?" She hissed through the bundle of fresh moss in her jaws. Badgerpaw bounded down from the small hill, skirting to a stop in front of his sister. Cloudsky gave Skunkpaw a lick on her forehead and retreated towards the kill-pile.

"I'm sorry," he mewed, "I'm sorry I got us all in trouble." Skunkpaw scoffed, tugging her chin upward to stop the moss from dragging on the ground. "I don't want this to be how we are, because I..." he stopped, struggling for the words. "I think... no, I *know* we're important," he felt as if the stars themselves were guiding his words. Skunkpaw stopped, looking at him with wide eyes. "Please," he begged, giving Skunkpaw's muzzle a nudge.

Skunkpaw placed the moss at her feet, dirt side down, and looked at her brother. "What's gotten into you?" She asked, whiskers twitching with amusement.

"W-what?"

"Of course we're important! You're going to be leader one day, and I'll be your deputy!" Skunkpaw purred, giving Badgerpaw a nudge back. "I forgive you for being a mouse-brain." With that, she picked up her moss and continued her trek towards the apprentice den. Lightpaw and Whitepaw were standing at its entrance, their tails twitching as Skunkpaw neared.

Pelt burning with embarrassment, he realized the cats in the clearing were gazing at him and he decided to turn back towards the elders den. Spottedpaw was exiting the den, Badgerpaw's used mouse-bile soaked moss ball in her jaws. "Don't bother, everything's done," she mewed simply. She stomped past him, her tail high in the air. *I'll have to make it right with Spottedpaw, too*... he sighed, knowing her trust wasn't something easily won back.

"How are we doing?" Smokestar called from the entrance, the bodies of Coalfur and Heatherheart flanking him. "Have all the dens been cared for?"

"I just finished up," Skunkpaw called from the apprentice den. Lightpaw was still sitting in the entryway, gazing sleepily around the clearing.

"Badgerpaw and I are finished," Spottedpaw chirped from beside the kill-pile. Badgerpaw could practically see her stomach rumbling with hunger.

"You may eat after you deliver prey to the elders," Smokestar mewed. Heatherheart broke away from him and headed towards the medicine den, her dark grey pelt being swallowed into the shadows. Spottedpaw grabbed a plump mouse from the top of the pile, the blood-scent being released into the air around her. Belly growling, Badgerpaw followed her lead, looking over the prey pile for something delicious. "Brownclaw likes voles," Smokestar purred.

Nodding his thanks, Badgerpaw hooked a vole with his claw, pulling it from the pile and snatching it up in his jaws. He followed the same trail he had taken earlier, feeling his paws sliding into paw-prints in the dirt that felt like they had been there for many moons. He pushed aside the ferns looming over the entrance to the den and stepped inside. Snowear was nibbling on the mouse that Spottedpaw had brought up, and Badgerpaw sent a silent thanks to Starclan that she was.

"I got your favorite, Brownclaw," he mewed, placing the vole at Brownclaw's paws.

"I smell vole," his sides heaved with effort as he sat up. Badgerpaw watched closely, his paws itching to help the elder up, but knowing his help would not be appreciated. "My thanks are in order," he mewed. Badgerpaw watched, horrified, as Brownclaw turned his head towards him. His eyes were pure white, no sign that there had been any color in them to begin with, besides the streaks of red on the outskirts of his eyes.

"N-no problem," he struggled to reply, shock making his pelt bristle.

"Would you like a bite?" Badgerpaw's ear twitched at Snowear's offer, hoping that Brownclaw wouldn't offer him the same deal. Spottedpaw gave her thanks and dove in, leaving Badgerpaw to stare awkwardly at Brownclaw devouring his meal.

Starbound Paws: Chapter 7

Wind rustled the tree-tops above the clearing gently, the branches quivering but the leaves staying firmly attached. Skunkpaw could see the faint outline of a birds nest from where she sat in the clearing, but it looked like it had been abandoned long ago. Shaking the thought from her head, she returned to her meal. The small pigeon lay beneath her chin, the feathers parted carefully to reveal the tender flesh.

Her mouth watered profusely, but she had promised Whitepaw that she would share it with him. His golden pelt appeared from the apprentice den, his paws traveling swiftly over the ground as he approached. "Sorry to keep you waiting," he mewed apologetically. "Lightpaw had a thorn stuck..." he cleared his throat, "let's just eat!" Wondering where exactly Lightpaw had a thorn stuck, Skunkpaw took a large bite from the pigeon's belly. The delicious flesh melted against her tongue, and she could feel her stomach beginning to calm with each bite.

Across the clearing, Skunkpaw could see Spottedpaw sitting next to the medicine den alone, a single mouse at her paws. Badgerpaw sat close by, throwing tentative looks in Spottedpaw's direction. If Spottedpaw had noticed, she gave no indication, settling down and digging into the plump mouse. Sighing to herself, Skunkpaw couldn't help but feel sorry for her brother. It had been two moons since their misadventure to the bush beside the Earthclan border, but Spottedpaw still hadn't forgiven him.

"That was delicious," Whitepaw's mew surprised her, her ears shooting up in alarm. "Woah, what did I say?"

"N-nothing, I was just... lost in thought," he followed Skunkpaw's gaze, his golden gaze landing on Badgerpaw.

"He'll be fine," Whitepaw comforted, "Spottedpaw has to forgive him eventually."

"I hope so," she sighed, giving her paws a couple of drowsy licks. "I hate seeing him so sad," Whitepaw nodded, reaching over and giving Skunkpaw a light lick on her forehead. Feeling calmed by his presence, Skunkpaw let her body relax beneath his gentle motions, giving a weak purr as she dozed off.

-

"What is she doing here?" A growl pierced the heavy mist of sleep that had surrounded Skunkpaw. "We didn't invite her!" The voice spat angrily.

"Calm down, Patcheye," a gentle voice mewed. A nose nudged Skunkpaw's ear, but she was too terrified to open her eyes. *I don't recognize these voices*; her fur was heavy with dread. "Come now, you're with friends," the voice comforted. As if on command, her eyes opened, spotting a jet-black tom staring her down, a small gray patch of fur surrounding his right eye.

"Why have you come here?" Patcheye demanded, his pelt bristling with rage, "what right do you have to invade Starclan hunting grounds?!"

"Starclan..? Invade?! No," she stood, her ears flattening against her head. "I-I didn't invade anything! I'm just an apprentice!"

"Patcheye," the she-cat beside him mewed. The sleek tortoiseshell's pelt glowed in the moonlight, and her dark green eyes burned with authority. Turning back towards Skunkpaw, her eyes softened, "we did not summon you here, Skunkpaw. You came of your own free will," she explained, "what is it you seek?"

"I didn't... I don't know how I got here," Skunkpaw felt her body quivering in fear. "I didn't mean to invade your hunting grounds, you have to believe me!"

"I do believe you," the tortoiseshell mewed quietly, "but no cat has ever entered our grounds without an invitation." Eyes narrowed, the cat looked Skunkpaw over. "Is there something that is troubling you?" The she-cat asked, sitting down in front of Skunkpaw and wrapping her tail around her paws. Suddenly, her ears flattened, a

low growl escaping her throat. Skunkpaw froze, following the tortoiseshell's gaze.

"W-what is that," Skunkpaw was frozen in fear. Beside her, the two star-cats exchanged a glance, returning their dread-filled eyes to Skunkpaw moments later.

"You must leave," Patcheye hissed. "Leave, and never come back!" The black tom turned, his fur bristling, and disappeared from sight.

"... He is right," the tortoiseshell murmured. "There is nothing we can do to help you in times to come," she stood, bowing her head to Skunkpaw. "Perhaps one day we shall meet again, but, until then, you should stay far away from here."

"Come on, Volemark!" Patcheye's urgent mew came through the mist, beckoning to the pretty tortoiseshell. "So much blood..."

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"Skunkpaw?" Whitepaw's concerned mew sounded in her ear. "Are you having a bad dream?" Opening her eyes, she realized Whitepaw's eyes were wide.

"No, no," Skunkpaw forced her mew to stay steady. "I... I was chasing a bird, but I ended up chasing it right off a ledge!" She lied, feeling her pelt burning with embarrassment. After a moment of consideration, Whitepaw's eyes softened, his nose touching the inside of her ear softly.

"Hopefully you'll have more sense now that you're awake," he purred, pulling away from Skunkpaw.

"Whitepaw!" Tigerjaw's mew sounded from the middle of the clearing, "we're leaving!"

"Patrols," he explained quickly. "I'll bring back a something nice to eat later, okay?" Skunkpaw nodded, biting back the urge to tell Whitepaw that she could hunt for herself. Pushing away the encounter, Skunkpaw looked down to her paws. The blood that surrounded them on Starclan hunting grounds was gone, her claws no longer frayed and her pelt intact.

"It seems you have an admirer," Darkstripe approached, his tail twitching thoughtfully behind him. "He's a good fighter," he admitted, looking towards where Whitepaw had disappeared moments ago. Skunkpaw zoned out her father's voice, looking around the clearing frantically for something to help her. Eyes landing on the medicine den, she sat up, her heart racing.

"I-I think I got a thorn stuck in my paw," she held up her paw, giving it a quick lick. "I'm going to see Heatherheart," Darkstripe mewed something in response, but her paws were already moving swiftly towards the shaded den, one held slightly above the ground until she was sure Darkstripe couldn't see her. "Heatherheart?" She called tentatively, giving the air a sniff.

"Skunkpaw?" A mew answered her from within the den, the small patch of sunlight shining through the roof revealing her light gray pelt as she moved towards the entrance. "Is something the matter?"

"I had... a dream," she began, looking around the den. "Is there any other..."

"No," Heatherheart interrupted, her eyes gleaming with curiosity, "Mudfur is out collecting herbs. What was this dream about?" She inquired, twitching her tail towards a small patch of moss in the corner of the den, "come, sit down, relax."

"I woke up in Starclan," Skunkpaw began, her fear returning as vividly as it had been during the dream. "Two cats were there with me," she paused, trying to recall the cat's names. "Patcheye and Volemark, they accused me of *invading* Starclan!" Heatherheart sat beside Skunkpaw, looking on as she settled in the moss. "Volemark seemed convinced that it was all a misunderstanding, but... but then... the blood!"

"Blood?" Heatherheart inquired; her eyes wide.

"There were... four cats," Skunkpaw recalled the broken bodies lying behind her in Starclan. "I didn't recognize any of them, but they... they were torn to pieces! The cats looked at me like I had done it!"

"Volemark was a Fireclan cat," Heatherheart murmured after a

moment. "Perhaps she's just concerned about her former clan," Skunkpaw considered it for a moment. "She could've told you to stay away out of Starclan as a way of hiding her fear."

"They sounded so serious..." Skunkpaw hung her head, despair flooding her senses.

"If Starclan wishes to speak to you, they will make themselves heard. Don't worry too much about it," Heatherheart comforted, "Starclan is not cruel - they will make amends."

"All cats old enough to stalk their own prey assemble beneath the ledge for a clan meeting," Smokestar's call rang through the den, freezing Skunkpaw's paws to the ground for a brief moment.

"Come now," Heatherheart motioned towards the entrance to the den. "We're being summoned."

"Look above, for it's come time for us to gather beneath the full moon in harmony," Smokestar's words rang clearly, though Skunkpaw thought he was speaking strangely. "Those who have been selected to journey alongside me must eat now; we leave at sun-down." With that, Smokestar jumped from the small ledge and wandered to the fresh-kill pile, plucking a fattened mouse from the bottom. "Heatherheart," he beckoned, turning tail and trotting towards his den.

"I have to go, but, please," Skunkpaw looked sideways, catching Heatherheart's cautious gaze. "Don't tell anyone what you saw – not until we can figure out what it means." Skunkpaw nodded, swallowing her rising anxiety. Heatherheart bounded to catch up after Smokestar, her hushed mews being lost as the clan began to settle down and eat.

Starbound Paws: Chapter 8

Badgerpaw sat silently outside the apprentice den, watching his clanmates group up and exit the clearing. While saddened that he wasn't chosen, he had noticed that Spottedpaw wasn't among the gathering group either. Her cream pelt was clearly visible from just outside the nursery, Embertail and Sunpelt alongside her chatting excitedly. The white splotches on her pelt were mesmerizing and her deep amber eyes shone brightly as she spoke.

"Still nothing?" Skunkpaw's mew broke him from his daze, "she sees you ogling her, you know."

"Shut up," Badgerpaw grumbled, turning his head towards his sister. "Is there something you want?" Excitement sparked in her eyes.

"Yes, actually," she mewed, turning her head towards where Tigerjaw and Heatherheart sat. "Tigerjaw said we can tag along on Heatherheart's herb-gathering if we want!" Badgerpaw felt ecstatic – he was finally going to explore the forest!

"We're leaving. Now!" Tigerjaw's stern tone reached them, his back already turned and his muscular body heading towards the exit. Heatherheart beckoned to them with her tail before turning and following Tigerjaw.

"Let's go," Skunkpaw padded after the two cats, her tail held high in the air. Badgerpaw followed slowly, tossing another longing gaze towards where Spottedpaw had previously been sitting. The spot was now bathed in moonlight, but the three cats that had gathered there were gone. Dismissing his disappointment, Badgerpaw gave a quick burst of speed to catch up with the group.

The outside of the camp was just as it had been when he, Spottedpaw, and Skunkpaw had gotten in trouble. The tree branches prevented a significant amount of moonlight from illuminating the path, but Badgerpaw guessed the older cats didn't need it for guidance. His paws followed the paw prints pressed into

the dirt, the smell of his sister, Tigerjaw and Heatherheart up ahead. Pushing his way through a small patch of tall grass, Badgerpaw was greeted by Tigerjaw's unemotional gaze.

"Keep up," Tigerjaw scolded, "we scented a fox around here not long ago." His piercing amber eyes attached to Badgerpaw's, "it'd be a shame to see you go." Swallowing his fear, Badgerpaw nodded, still feeling his tail twinge with anxiety. Seeming satisfied with Badgerpaw's reaction, he resumed his lumbering trot through the underbrush.

"That fox was scented a moon ago," Heatherheart mewed under her breath, "he's just pulling your tails." Skunkpaw and Badgerpaw exchanged glances before following Tigerjaw once more, his powerful form pushing through the ferns effortlessly.

"I wonder if he was that big as an apprentice," Skunkpaw pondered beside him. *That's a good question...* Badgerpaw simply twitched his ears in response. "... He's not someone I would want to make angry," his sister concluded, bounding forward to close the gap between herself and Tigerjaw. Heatherheart lagged back, gazing after Skunkpaw, clearly lost in thought.

"Does Tigerjaw know where you need to go?" Badgerpaw questioned, seeing Heatherheart's eyes focus on the forest ahead of her once more. She began moving forward, pushing through the fern easily and trotting across the grass path.

"Yes," she responded a heartbeat later. "He's here because we're heading to the Earthclan border," she hesitated, glancing towards Tigerjaw tentatively. "Things have gotten worse since your adventure some moons ago... Starclan willing, Smokestar will propose a way to end this conflict."

"How would he do that?" Badgerpaw inquired, realizing they were falling further behind Tigerjaw and Skunkpaw. A long stretch of tall grass spread before them, only the shaking of blades signaling where his clanmates were.

"I suggested we just leave the past in the past," Heatherheart shook her head; "I don't think it'll be that simple, however." Heatherheart

sighed, giving her chest a quick lick, "I didn't mean to dump all that on you. Sometimes I just get talking and..."

"Heatherheart!" Heatherheart and Badgerpaw had emerged from the tall grass, coming muzzle-to-muzzle with Tigerjaw. His eyes grazing over the two cats, "I thought you'd gotten lost." His eyes sparkled with what Badgerpaw thought was amusement. Almost as soon as it had appeared, it was gone once more – replaced by the usual stern gaze. "Move along, we might beat Smokestar's patrol back if we hurry." Heatherheart nodded her agreement, giving Badgerpaw a quick glance to make sure he was following.

Badgerpaw bound forward, keeping his paw steps in synch with Skunkpaw's', whose tail was twitching wildly behind her. Suddenly, a fattened mouse darted across their path, catching the attention of Skunkpaw most off all, its stubby feet scrabbling desperately against grass. Instantly, she jumped towards it, racing into the greenery after the mouse, her blackened pelt disappearing among the bushes. Tigerjaw gave a low growl, his paws working furiously into the ground as he took off after her.

Badgerpaw fought the urge to race after them, knowing that the reason they were there was to protect Heatherheart against any threats. The dark grey medicine cat sat down and gave her paws a calm lick. "Skunkpaw is quite excitable," she mused aloud.

"Unfortunately," Badgerpaw grumbled. He lifted his nose to the air, drawing it a deep breath to smell for intruders.

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"Get back here," her ragged breaths were beginning to burn her lungs. The mouse had stayed out of the shrubs, its feet leaving small impressions in the dirt as it fled. *It's probably too fat to fit in any tunnels,* Skunkpaw thought silently; taking note of the claw-scratched tree trunk she had just run past. *I have to make sure I can make it back*!

Skunkpaw passed bush after bush, noticing the grass below her wearing thin as she sprinted forward. The scent lines had disappeared as well, the smell of damp moss clogging her nostrils

instead. The mouse wove around a tree trunk, the gnarled roots almost catching Skunkpaw's paws as she leapt over it.

She was determined to get this catch – to prove that she had a place in the clan. Three moons had passed since her and Badgerpaw had become apprentices but they hadn't received any battle or hunting training. *What good are apprentices that just fetch moss*, she wondered sourly. A loud squeak rose into the air, shocking her back into reality. Ahead, the mouse she had been after was lying on its side, the light-gray muzzle of another cat buried deep in its stomach.

Skidding to a stop, Skunkpaw looked frantically for a place to take cover, but the cat had already spotted her. "I wasn't expecting *two* meals today," the black tom hissed. "Never had kit meat before," the malicious tone forced the fur on her spine to stand. *This cat... he's a monster*! Rising to his paws, the cat took a menacing step forward, the dull moonlight revealing a multitude of scars across his muzzle.

"You won't be eating me, you badger-brain!" Whipping around, Skunkpaw fled, her paws thumping heavily against the ground. The tom gave chase, his snarl chilling Skunkpaw to the bone. Exhaustion wore at her paws, her previous chase of the mouse wearing her stamina dangerously low. *I'm going to die*, Skunkpaw felt panic rising in her throat, *and this...* cat *is going to eat me*! Summoning the last of her strength, she threw herself as the nearest oak, clawing her way up its decaying bark frantically.

"You think I can't climb after you, kit?" The scarred tom snarled, launching himself at the same tree. His sharp claws hooked easily into the bark, his body moving effortlessly up the trunk and closer to where Skunkpaw had stopped. Exhausted, Skunkpaw collapsed onto the branch. Her lungs felt ready to explode and her body screamed for rest.

A furious yowl echoed through the trees. Skunkpaw's eyes flew open, spotting a black and white burr speeding towards the tom. With a loud growl, the cat leapt, smashing into the tom's side, flinging him from the tree. The tom tumbled across the grass, what little fur he had on his stomach now coated with bark and sap. Sending a silent prayer to Starclan, Skunkpaw flung herself from the tree, her paws almost giving way on impact.

After she was sure she could stand, Skunkpaw raced to the mysterious cat's side, giving as vicious a growl as she possibly could. "Coward," the tom spat, glaring from the new cat to Skunkpaw. "I *will* devour you!" With a final growl, the cat turned tail and ran, his body sliding into a bush after a couple moments of running.

"Th-thank you," she gasped, letting her paws buckle underneath her.

"Where am I?" The cat questioned, her pitch-black eyes looking around the clearing, filled with genuine confusion. "I-I was just at the gathering and then..." she looked down, eyes turning to slits when she spotted Skunkpaw. "What are you doing on Waterclan territory?!"

"Waterclan?" Skunkpaw echoed, sniffing the air. The familiar scents of Fireclan surrounded her. The cat sniffed, her whiskers twitching, before returning her gaze to Skunkpaw's.

"This is Fireclan territory..." she looked around, pelt bristling. Swinging around, the she-cat sprinted away, the curious pattern of white on her spine being brushed down as she entered a bush. A loud rustling sounded to the side, but Skunkpaw was too exhausted to defend herself. With one final rustle, Tigerjaw pushed his way through a thorn-bush towards her.

"There you are," Tigerjaw growled furiously. He stepped into her line of sight, burrs and thorns hanging loosely from his orange and black pelt. "I'm getting *sick* of chasing you..." nose twitching, Tigerjaw glanced around. "That rouge was here," he growled.

"He chased me," Skunkpaw admitted, still trying to gather the strength to stand. "I-I must have lost him when I climbed the tree." Tigerjaw looked around silently before turning his gaze to Skunkpaw.

"That rogue's name is Monk," he mewed after a heartbeat of observing Skunkpaw. "He's a dangerous cat – more dangerous than any fox or badger I've seen. Let's go," he mewed. Skunkpaw watched Tigerjaw turn away, now actively avoiding her gaze. "Heatherheart still needs to collect her herbs, and I have to report this to

Smokestar." Skunkpaw was mystified as to why Tigerjaw had giving up his lecture so soon. On any other day, he'd yowl until her ears fell off.

Struggling to her paws, Skunkpaw limped after Tigerjaw, pushing past the bush that still had pieces of his fur on. The scent was enticing, but Skunkpaw forced herself to block it out. "W-wait up," she called weakly. Almost instantaneously, Tigerjaw appeared, his broad shoulder pushing up against her. Feeling heat flood into her cheeks, Skunkpaw looked ahead, leaning heavily on him for support and joining Tigerjaw in avoiding each other's gazes.

Starbound Paws: Chapter 9

Smokestar's patrol had gotten back without any problems, the steady stream of cats into the empty clearing warming Badgerpaw's chest. The moon had been covered by clouds shortly after Tigerjaw and Skunkpaw had returned; out of breath and covered in burrs. Skunkpaw avoided his questions and limped off with Heatherheart as soon as they had returned, leaving Badgerpaw to sit in silence with Tigerjaw until Smokestar approached.

"You seem uneasy, Tigerjaw," Smokestar observed. Tigerjaw looked to the cats that had entered the clearing, many of them retreating to their dens without a word.

"Monk is back," Tigerjaw mewed. Badgerpaw could see Smokestar's jaw clench, his gaze hardening.

"Did you drive him off?" Tigerjaw shook his head, looking over to the medicine den. "Then he's still on our territory?"

"No," his gaze was pulled from the medicine den. "He was after Skunkpaw; she said she lost him after climbing a tree." Badgerpaw shifted his weight from paw to paw, suddenly feeling as if he didn't belong in this discussion. "I smelled Waterclan scent," Tigerjaw hissed quietly.

"Did you recognize the smell?" Skunkpaw's head popped out from the medicine den, her ears flat against her head and her tail dragging in the dirt behind her. Smokestar sat down in front of Tigerjaw, his eyes still boring into Tigerjaw's.

"It was Fallencloud," Smokestar narrowed his eyes. Tigerjaw shifted his tail, wrapping it properly around his front paws. Badgerpaw wasn't sure he had ever seen Tigerjaw *nervous* before.

"Fallencloud? She was at the gathering..." His dark-green gaze was suddenly focused on Badgerpaw, his eyes burning into Badgerpaw's pelt. "Did you smell anything? Anything at all?"

"N-no," Badgerpaw stammered. Apparently Smokestar *hadn't* forgotten he was there.

"And it was just her, correct?" Tigerjaw nodded, his eyes landing on Skunkpaw once more. Her black and white pelt moved sluggishly across the clearing. She gave the kill-pile a tentative sniff, but flinched away as if it had swiped at her. "Then we must increase the patrols along the Windclan borders. A rogue and a *Waterclan* cat in one night," Smokestar shook his head. "Something must be done."

"Yes, Smokestar," Tigerjaw agreed. "I'll take a group at first light."

"No apprentices," Smokestar warned, rising to his paws and padding towards his den.

"Why did Smokestar seem surprised that it was a Waterclan cat?" Badgerpaw risked asking, looking up to Tigerjaw.

"We don't share a border with Waterclan," he answered. Without another word, he stood, padding slowly towards the warrior den and slipping in. The ferns fell back into place when he passed, the green strands shivering from the disruption.

Unease was consuming Badgerpaw's thoughts; the gentle warmth of the nursery seemed so far away now. They were only apprentices, but it seemed like it'd been many moons since he sat purring alongside his sister and mother. Sighing, Badgerpaw decided to settle down for the night, hoping tomorrows light would bring better tidings. He padded past the kill-pile, which smelled more tantalizing than it ever had before, but Badgerpaw couldn't bring himself to eat. He shouldered his way past the greens draped across the apprentice den, feeling warmth spread across his entire body. Feeling more tired than he had ever felt in his life, Badgerpaw collapsed into his nest, noticing Skunkpaw settled in the corner of the den, away from all the apprentices.

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Skunkpaw was still curled in the corner when Badgerpaw awoke, twitching wildly in her sleep. Now that there was a steady stream of light pouring through the ferns, Badgerpaw could see she hadn't

moved her moss to sleep on. The dirt below his feet was cold, despite the warm rays of light.

"Heatherheart says to let her rest," Whitepaw had poked his head into the den. "And Coalfur is looking for you," his head retreated, the ferns rustling gently behind him. Badgerpaw glanced at his sister once more; seeing that she had stopping twitching, but was still deep asleep. Padding out of the den, he was forced to squint, the direct rays of light burning his eyes.

"It's about time we got to training," Coalfur mused. Badgerpaw's eyes adjusted to the light slowly, but he could see his mentor, Coalfur, and Smokestar sitting in the middle of the clearing.

"Since Skunkpaw is recovering from yesterday's scare, I shall accompany you both," Smokestar mewed. Badgerpaw was overjoyed*; finally, a chance to prove myself*! "Lesson one," Smokestar purred, "you must keep your tail under control." Badgerpaw looked behind him, seeing his tail was twitching excitedly. Feeling heat flush into his cheeks, he whipped his tail back into place and hung his head.

"Let's go," Coalfur motioned towards the exit. "Try to be quiet, though. Lightpaw and Whitepaw are taking their assessment today." He glanced towards Smokestar, who was still watching Badgerpaw. Turning, Coalfur padded away, Smokestar rising to follow. Shaking away his embarrassment, Badgerpaw bounded after them, leaving the leafy walls of the camp behind him for the day.

"This way," Smokestar beckoned towards a small shrub. Badgerpaw followed quietly, his ears perked to catch prey sounds as they moved. Shouldering past the shrub, Badgerpaw entered a small grassy clearing, the claw marks of countless cats imbedded in the dirt. "This is where you'll be training today," Smokestar was sitting calmly near an oak sapling. "The bigger training clearing is being used for Lightpaw and Whitepaw's assessment."

With slight nod to Coalfur, Smokestar raced across the small clearing and launched himself against a gnarled tree. He clawed his way up the tree and into the branches, ignoring the squawks of disturbed birds among the leaves. "We're going to start with your

hunting crouch," Coalfur cleared his throat. "Bend your front paws inward, but keep all of your weight on your hind legs."

Badgerpaw did as he was instructed, crouching down against the plush grass and looking to where Coalfur was sitting. Narrowing his eyes, Coalfur nodded, dropping into the same hunter's crouch. Padding forward, Badgerpaw began to feel the weight of his entire body on his hind legs. With one clumsy motion, Badgerpaw pounced, being swatted aside easily by Coalfur.

"You felt the weight as you moved, I could see if in your gaze," he mewed. Badgerpaw groaned; shaking away the bits of grass stuck in his fur. "Your eyes shifted around me, when they should be focused *on* me."

"How am I supposed to do that?" Badgerpaw questioned angrily, half hoping Coalfur hadn't heard him.

"You will get used to the amount of weight you put on your hind legs," he comforted, motioning for Badgerpaw to watch. Slowly, Coalfur lowered himself against the grass, gently moving himself forward. His muscles bulged from beneath his pelt with each step, and Badgerpaw could see the many moons of hunting Coalfur had endured. "Did you see what I did?" He inquired, sitting up after reaching the end of the clearing and glancing towards Badgerpaw. "I'm distributing the weight throughout my whole hind-quarters, to make it easier to bear."

"I think I got it," he muttered. Reassuming the position, Badgerpaw shifted some of the weight put on his back feet, placing it in his upper back leg. The weight was easier to carry, and Badgerpaw felt himself move much lighter through the clearing. "Like this?"

"Exactly!" Coalfur purred, padding over towards where Badgerpaw was still crouched. "Now try pouncing," glancing around the clearing, he spotted a sizeable rock. He hooked it beneath a claw, sending it tumbling towards where he had sat moments ago. "On your mark," he mewed.

Badgerpaw nodded, creeping forward, making sure his paws were stepping as lightly as they possibly could. Bunching his muscles, he

leapt, catching the rock with one forepaw but sliding the other down the side of the slippery material.

"Mouse dung!" Badgerpaw had unintentionally unbalanced himself, sending his forearm awkwardly underneath his body as he fell.

"You all right?" Coalfur questioned, though he made no movement towards Badgerpaw.

"Yes," Badgerpaw mewed through gritted teeth. His leg pounded, the pain flowering up into his shoulder blade and aching in his chest.

"Then try again," Coalfur instructed firmly.

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The sun was on its way down the horizon when Coalfur had declared the training session over. Badgerpaw felt as if he'd learned a lot, but everything they'd done needed a lot more practice before Badgerpaw could cross it off his list of things to learn. When they entered the clearing, Badgerpaw was surprised to see all of the clan cats gathered around Smokestar's ledge.

"Welcome back, you two," Smokestar welcomed them. Coalfur nodded his thanks, and Badgerpaw mimicked his nod quickly. "Now we can start," he cleared his throat. "Today, we will welcome two new warriors into our clan. Lightpaw, step forward," he obeyed, his eyes lit with pride. "I ask our warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice," Smokestar began. "He has trained for countless moons to learn to defend and feed his clan, and now I commend him to you in his turn. Do you, Lightpaw, promise to uphold the warrior code and defend your clan with your life, if it is deemed necessary?"

"I do," Lightpaw's voice shook, but Badgerpaw knew it was from excitement.

"Then from here on, your warrior name shall be Lightfoot," Smokestar padded forward, touching Lightfoot's shoulder with his tail. "Whitepaw, step forward," Lightfoot bowed, shuffling away to allow his brother room. "Do you accept the aforementioned vows?"

"I do," Whitepaw agreed.

"Then from here on, your warrior name shall be Whitebelly," Smokestar touched his shoulder lightly with his tail. "May Starclan ever light your paths," Whitebelly bowed, stepping backwards to stand beside Lightfoot.

"Lightfoot! Whitebelly!" The clan rose in a chorus of the newest Fireclan warrior names. Badgerpaw joined in, feeling a rush of excitement hit him like a jolt of lightning. *I can't wait to become a warrior*, Badgerpaw purred aloud, stepping forward to touch noses with Lightfoot.

"Congratulations," he mewed, receiving a grateful nod in return. *One day*, Badgerpaw thought happily, backing up to allow the rest of the clan to greet their newest warriors.

Starbound Paws: Chapter 10

Skunkpaw awoke to the sound of her brother snoring, the intense training sessions Coalfur had put him through the past couple of days wearing him to the bone. He had talked until she fell asleep about how excited he was to learn new things, despite the ache in his legs and the pain in his paws.

Skunkpaw had finally begun training with Smokestar, who was relentless. He pushed her each session, and she wasn't allowed to go back to the camp until she was sore all over. Groaning aloud, Skunkpaw struggled to her paws, barely resisting the urge to go to Heatherheart about a 'bellyache' to see if she'd give her catmint.

She padded forward, pushing aside the fronds and into the clearing. Heatherheart and Mudfur were eating a small pigeon beside the medicine den, their heads bowed as if they were having a hushed discussion. Glancing towards the nursery, Skunkpaw noticed Whitebelly and Lightfoot talking loudly with their mother, Sunpelt.

Sunpelts' belly had grown rapidly the past moon, and Heatherheart talked endlessly about it being a sign of a large litter. Skunkpaw couldn't help but feel overjoyed at the thought of more paws in the clan. The clearing had been deathly silent since her and Badgerpaw had become apprentices.

"Skunkpaw?" Smokestars' surprised mew sounded beside her. "Did you forget we're not training today?"

"Ah, no," Skunkpaw shuffled her paws against the dirt. "I was going to see if anyone needs a paw with anything," she admitted. Smokestar looked impressed, nodding his head towards the nursery.

"Sunpelt was hoping to get more feathers for her nest," he mewed. "I'm sure she'd appreciate the help." Skunkpaw twitched her tail in annoyance. *I was hoping to help patrol*, she thought sourly. "Don't forget we're short on apprentices," he reminded her gently. "Every little bit helps, so just try to *sound* happy about helping."

"Right," she sighed. *He must be psychic*, she mused, taking his advice to heart. Giving her chest fur a quick lick to soothe the ruffled fur, she padded over to where Lightfoot, Whitebelly and Sunpelt sat. Whitebelly looked over as she approached, his tail shooting up into the air.

"Hey, Skunkpaw," he greeted her, rising to his paws to touch noses. "What brings you over here?"

"Smokestar told me Sunpelt might want more feathers," Skunkpaw looked to Sunpelt. "Do you want a certain type?" She inquired, noticing Whitebellys' tail droop slightly as she avoided his nose.

"Any type is fine..." Sunpelt mewed hesitantly, looking towards the fern covered nursery entrance. "But if you don't mind, blackbird feathers are *always* the softest." *Of course*, Skunkpaw sighed inwardly, *blackbirds are the hardest to catch*!

"I'll see if I can find any," Skunkpaw gave Sunpelt a small nod before backing away. Lightfoot had been suspiciously quiet during the entire encounter, barely acknowledging that Skunkpaw was there. *Not my problem,* Skunkpaw shrugged. Padding towards the kill pile, Skunkpaw gave it a sniff, not scenting a blackbird among the carcasses.

"It's getting too close to leaf-bare to be picky about your food," a voice growled behind her. Whipping around, she found herself muzzle-to-muzzle with Tigerjaws' large frame.

"I-I'm not being picky," she defended quickly. "I was looking for a blackbird – for its feathers!"

"Uh-huh," Tigerjaw padded around her, giving the pile a sniff as well. "Is Sunpelt looking for more feathers already?" There was a hint of playfulness in his tone.

"Yes, and I was hoping there'd be one here," Skunkpaw explained.

"No such luck," he mewed, sitting back on his hind-legs. "No patrols have brought back a blackbird for at least a moon now; it's getting too cold for them here." Skunkpaw stepped back, considering her

options. "We better go find one," Tigerjaw mewed, his piercing amber eyes on Skunkpaw. "You don't say no to a queen," he elaborated, jerking his head towards the camp entrance. "Besides, you're free of training today," Skunkpaw groaned loudly. "This'll help keep your claws sharp."

"I guess," she agreed reluctantly. Tigerjaw nodded, seeming almost pleased with her response. "Are we going to bring any other cats?" She inquired, motioning towards where Whitebelly and Lightfoot sat, "I'm sure they'd like to join us."

Tigerjaw looked past Skunkpaw, catching Whitebelly give his kin a friendly shove; initiating a play-fight. "You two," his voice had taken on a less friendly tone. "You're helping us find feathers for your mother's' nest," Skunkpaw felt a shiver go down her spine. The authority in Tigerjaws' voice was chilling. Lightfoot bounded forward, as if he was glad to be away from the nursery, while Whitebelly lagged behind.

"We're warriors now, you know," Whitebelly grumbled.

"Yes, but you still act like apprentices," Tigerjaw countered. Whitebellys' ears flattened against his head, but he said nothing more. "If we're all set, let's move," Skunkpaw nodded to signal she was ready. *The sooner this gets done, the sooner I can help with patrols*. Tigerjaw didn't wait for Whitebelly to agree before turning tail and padding towards the camp entrance.

"What a bossy fur-ball," Whitebelly mumbled. Skunkpaw gave a slight nod, but she was more concerned with keeping up with Tigerjaw to repair Whitebellys' injured pride. Exiting the camp entrance, she was greeted with the bright stream of sunlight that had greeted her each morning as she went to train. The grass surrounding the entrance was beginning to turn brown, and the leaves had turned colors and launched themselves from the trees.

"It's beautiful," Skunkpaw was in awe. She ignored the snort Lightfoot gave her, and continued to embrace the beauty of leaf-fall.

"You'll see it again next leaf-fall," Tigerjaw called back. "Depending on whether or not you get Sunpelt her feathers... Starclan help you

if you don't." Skunkpaw felt as if a thorn had been driven into her heart. *Starclan...* she hadn't forgotten the all-too-vivid dream where the two Starclan warriors told her to stay away. What was an apprentice to do without Starclans' guidance?

"Hey," Whitebelly had stopped beside her. "No time for being lost in thought, either," he purred. "Tigerjaw's right about Sunpelts' temper... so we should get this bird as fast as we can." Shaking away the rising panic, Skunkpaw bounded after Tigerjaw and Lightfoot, catching a glance of Lightfoots' black pelt beyond a patch of dying lavender.

"Wait up," the color disappeared as soon as she had glimpsed it, sending a fresh wave of aggravation up her spine. "Come on, wait! I don't know where to find blackbirds..." she pushed her way through the lavender, only to be greeted by a starry figure that seemed all too familiar. "You're..." the figure turned, revealing a pair of unmistakable forest-green eyes and a light gray pelt. "Smokestar?"

"No, little one," she purred. "Come closer, for there is something I must share with you," Skunkpaw obeyed, padding up to the starry-cats' side. "You are not to blame for Starclans' fear, as they have begun to notice a light inside of you that burns far brighter than they have ever seen."

"What... what do you mean?" Skunkpaw felt confusion ruffling her fur.

"You command the stars, little one, and Starclan is scared of the power you possess."

"I... command the stars?"

"Five stars," the starry-cat dug poked five holes into the dirt below her with a thorn-sharp claw. "You may not be aware of your power, but these five stars will help you defend the clans against the blood, and the shadows."

"I... I don't understand," Skunkpaw's' head was spinning.

"It will all come to you one day, little one," she comforted. "Do not

fear," the figure began to fade, "I will always be beside you." The starry cat had completely disappeared, the light that had burned within the figure dulling and returning to the graying shade of leaf-fall.

"What..." Skunkpaw whipped around, connecting with the burning hazel eyes she had grown all too familiar with. "What in Starclan's name was that?!" His pelt was ruffled, and a mysterious light had sparked in his gaze.

"How much did you hear..?" She whispered tentatively, shivering as Tigerjaw's eyes focused on her.

"*Command the stars*?"

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"I don't know what you did, but Tigerjaw has been glaring at you since you re-joined the group," Whitebelly whispered. Skunkpaw could not help but twitch her tail in annoyance. *Of course he's watching me; he heard that cat say I command the stars!* "What did you do, by the way?"

"Nothing," she stated plainly. Whitebelly shifted away from her, clearly hurt by her rebuttal. Skunkpaw, however, was still not concerned with his feelings. She was more concerned with how Tigerjaw was going to handle his newfound information.

"This is where Blackbirds like to nest," Lightfoot piped up from beside them. Skunkpaw jumped, she had almost completely forgotten he was there! "I'll climb the tree and see if there's any nests with feathers," Tigerjaw nodded his approval. Lightfoot took a running start, launching his lithe body against the tree trunk and racing his way up the hardened tree.

"Wouldn't it be nice if we could find some here, and go back to camp before dark?" Whitebelly mused from the bottom of the trunk. Tigerjaw grunted, though Skunkpaw was not sure if it was an approving grunt. Skunkpaw looked to the side, suddenly aware of Tigerjaw's gaze burning through her pelt.

"Nothing up here!" Lightfoot called down, the blackened fur on his head poking through a bushel of leaves. "There are nests; they smell like Blackbird, but no feathers! How weird is that?"

"We'll just have to catch one and bring back fresh feathers," Tigerjaw called. His gaze tore away from Skunkpaw, his eyes focusing on the shivering branch that Lightfoot had just withdrawn his head from. Rustling sounded above them, and Skunkpaw was surprised to see that Lightfoot had made his way down unbelievably fast.

"He's awesome at climbing," Skunkpaw breathed. Whitebelly scoffed, turning his head towards Tigerjaw and mewing something quietly.

"Yeah, we'll try a few trees down," Tigerjaw agreed. "Maybe there'll be some empty nests," Skunkpaw took the lead, her ears pricked to catch any birds. For a few heartbeats, she heard nothing, but when they passed a large oak she caught the faint flapping of wings.

"Did you hear that?" Whitebelly looked up and narrowed his eyes, a bright light flashing in his eyes as they connected with the body of an adult blackbird. "There's one!" Skunkpaw glared at the ground, angry that she had not said something before Whitebelly. "Lightfoot, you go up, I'll climb the tree next to it to stop it if it tries to fly off."

"Sounds like a plan," Lightfoot agreed. Tigerjaw was suspiciously quiet throughout the encounter, but Skunkpaw knew it was because he was staring talons at her. Lightfoot wound up again, bounding towards the tree and launching himself up it. Bark shards flew every which way when his claws connected, showering Skunkpaw and Tigerjaw with the dark brown flecks.

"Watch it!" Tigerjaw spat angrily, his tail mimicking the fury. Skunkpaw heard him mew something, but she was sure it was not an apology. Skunkpaw sat back on her legs, feeling a refreshing breeze pick up and delicately caress her whiskers as it passed. Despite the chill, the surrounding forest was beautiful, and she was happy she could experience it first-paw.

Starbound Paws: Chapter 11

"It'th a gooth thing we founth these," Whitebelly purred behind a mouthful of feathers.

"You sound ridiculous," Skunkpaw sighed, tail-tip twitching. Lightfoot and Tigerjaw had taken the lead to the way back to camp, and Skunkpaw noticed that Lightfoot's tail was straight up in the air. *Can't wait to hear about this hunt for moons and moons...* Lightfoot had practically flown up the tree, pinning and swiftly dispatching the blackbird. The entire nest was filled with feathers, as if the blackbird he had killed was using its own feathers to line its nest.

Tigerjaw had grabbed the blackbird, and Whitebelly and Lightfoot had grabbed as many feathers as they could carry. It would be more than enough to get line Sunpelt's nest until her kits were apprenticed. Though her heart warmed at the thought of Sunpelt's kits, Skunkpaw could not shake the feeling of being watched; beady eyes observing her every move.

The group padded towards the camp in eerie silence, the occasional rustle of grass making Skunkpaw flinch preemptively. She could feel Tigerjaw's eyes on her pelt, a small grunt escaping his blackbird-filled mouth after every couple of steps. Approaching the tendrils surrounding the camp entrance, Lightfoot bound forward, his black-as-night pelt being swallowed into the dark tunnel.

Tigerjaw followed close behind, slowly, with Whitebelly nearly bumping into Tigerjaw's rear as he went to enter. Throwing a tentative glance over his shoulder, Whitebellys' golden pelt followed his two clanmates. Skunkpaw stopped in her tracks, the overwhelming feeling of danger crawling in her pelt and pricking her flesh.

"Get in here," Tigerjaw's stern mew pierced the silence. Shaking away as much of the dreadful feeling as she could, Skunkpaw dragged her paws forward, inching past the tendrils carefully. Panicked mews sounded in the clearing as the group approached, a

majority of the clan gathered in front of the nursery with their muzzles close together. "What's going on?" Tigerjaw demanded.

"Shh!" Bluewind hissed, padding towards the arriving group. Badgerpaw sat silently beside his mentor, Coalfur, who sat with his eyes planted firmly on the ground below him outside the nursery. Blood scented in the air, and Skunkpaw felt her fur standing on edge. "Sunpelt started kitting," she mewed quietly. Alarm fired through Whitebellys' eyes, "don't," Bluewind warned. "Heatherheart and Mudfur need as much space as they can get."

"Sunpelt is only a few moons along... oh, StarClan help her!" Embertail mewed from beside them. Skunkpaw had heard stories from Snowear about Embertail's kitting, and how difficult it was. She had borne a liter of four kits; only Spottedpaw surviving the long period of premature kitting. Embertails' fur stood on edge, as if she was reliving her horrific experience.

"FireClan!" Smokestars' mew echoed through the clearing. "StarClan will watch over our medicine cats as they help Sunpelt with her kitting. Lightfoot," the black toms' head rose, "you will sit beside the nursery and offer your assistance whenever they may need it."

"Yes, Smokestar."

"When dawn strikes, Tigerjaw will take your place. Now, rest. Patrols will be sent when the sun rises." With that, Smokestar retreated to his den, his deputy, Bluewind, jumping up to follow him.

"Smokestar will hear about your little secret in the morning," Tigerjaw growled beside her. Struck by unease, Skunkpaw stood, frozen, watching as he picked up his blackbird and deposited it into the fresh-kill pile.

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Skunkpaw awoke to the sound of purring in the clearing, the mews of the clan cats vibrating gently through the den. Shaking the sleep from her paws, Skunkpaw padded past the ferns blocking her view, spotting Heatherheart quickly among the crowd.

"What's going on?" She murmured to herself, jumping when Badgerpaw appeared behind her. Fear pricked in her pelt at the sight of the crowd gathered again. "Sunpelt?" She whispered, almost dreading the response.

"Sunpelt made it," he purred. "And so did her six kits."

"*Six*?" Skunkpaw echoed, looking for Sunpelt's mate among the sea of cats. "Coalfur must be so happy," Skunkpaw purred.

"He's in with Sunpelt now," he gave his chest fur a quick lick. "Heatherheart says it's not safe for many cats to visit. Until the kits grow a bit more, anyway," Badgerpaw sighed. "I was looking forward to seeing them," he admitted softly. Skunkpaw simply stared at her brother, the paternal spark in his eyes shocking her. Tearing her gaze from Badgerpaw, she glanced around the clearing, her eyes meeting the amber gaze of Tigerjaw. He sat, unmoving, outside the nursery.

"Skunkpaw, hi!" The cheery mew of Spottedpaw retracted her attention. "It feels like it's been *moons* since I saw you! Training going well, I hope?"

"Yeah," she mewed dismissively. "Yours?"

"Of course! Bluewind is a spectacular mentor..." Skunkpaw found herself staring over at Tigerjaw again, who returned it with a slight glare. "... right?!" Skunkpaw's ears twitched irritably. Spottedpaw never used to talk this much when they were in the nursery.

"Sorry, can you repeat that?" Skunkpaw tore her gaze from Tigerjaw, looking to Spottedpaw's hurt gaze.

"I can't wait to see the new kits," Spottedpaw mewed. Skunkpaw was sure that she was trying to change the subject, but she *really* did not mind.

"I'm just happy there'll be new apprentices soon," she sighed. "If I had to fetch one more pile of moss for the elders my paws were going to fall off."

"I'll probably be a warrior by then," Spottedpaw mewed dreamily. "I

might be able to mentor one myself! Oh, I hope I get one who's got so much energy, they put me to shame!" A hearty scoff sounded beside her, and, much to Skunkpaw's surprise, Badgerpaw's whiskers were twitching with amusement.

"A kit with more energy than you? Starclan help us all," he purred. Spottedpaw's tail-tip flicked with amusement her mouth opening to respond with a friendly snip. Skunkpaw had already lost interest in the conversation that Badgerpaw and Spottedpaw were beginning to have, each one letting out soft meows of laughter.

Skunkpaw could feel her heart pounding against her chest, suddenly feeling overwhelmingly anxious. Without a word, she turned, padding towards the dirt-place exit near the apprentice den. As if they had a mind of their own, her paws took off running, no destination in her mind.

The trees raced past Skunkpaw, the scurrying of mice retreating into their dens as she ran and birds calling out their annoyance. After a couple of hard heart-beats, Skunkpaw's paws stopped, and she looked around to figure out where she had ended up.

This is near the Earthclan border... she sighed. The anxiety had subsided, but now she was out of breath and a little lost. Skunkpaw glanced around again, this time catching a flash of white in the corner of her vision. Intrigued, she followed the direction the flash had gone, carefully walking on Fireclans' side of the border.

"My, my," a gentle mew purred. "It's been a while since I've seen a cat out this far," Skunkpaw looked up, catching the bright green eyes of a pure white cat. The cats' white-tipped whiskers twitched with amusement at Skunkpaw's silence, "well? Want to chat a bit?"

"Oh, uh," Skunkpaw stuttered, "I shouldn't be talking..."

"... to a cat from a different clan," the she-cat purred. "I've heard everything in the book, youngin'. Please," she waved her tail towards the Fireclan part of the forest floor, "have a seat with me for a while." Skunkpaw obliged, sitting carefully next to the beautiful white cat, scenting the air for any other of her clan members. "I'm Flowerseeker," she mewed softly.

"Skunkpaw," Flowerseeker bowed her head slightly in greeting. "What are you doing out here?" Skunkpaw questioned, looking around the area. The trees thinned around this area, leaving few trees to hide their conversation if any cat were to walk by.

"I like to walk around on my own," she purred, "sometimes I forget what it was like to be an apprentice. To be free and full of energy!" Flowerseeker's fur was bristling with excitement, her eyes shinning with countless moons of stories. "Then I get out here and realize I'm just an old cat with a bad back," Skunkpaw could not help but let out a tiny huff of laughter. "You looked troubled," Flowerseeker's eyes were gazing out towards the distant lake, "want to talk?"

Skunkpaw simply shook her head, fearing she would already be in enough trouble for conversing with a cat from another clan. Flowerseeker nodded respectfully, reaching over to give Skunkpaw's shoulder a gentle nudge with her pink nose. Despite the fear crawling beneath her pelt about this meeting, Skunkpaw felt more relaxed with Flowerseeker then she had with any cat in a long time.

"Flowerseeker!" Skunkpaw's head whipped around, hearing the unfamiliar calls of cats nearby.

"Oh my, they've found me out," Flowerseeker sighed. "Better get going, it was nice chatting with you, Skunkpaw."

"Y-yeah," Skunkpaw agreed, ducking into the nearest bush and holding her breath as a patrol of cats burst from the greenery.

"There you are," a small gray she-cat mewed. The black specks on her pelt stood on end, Skunkpaw assumed it was related to the worry laced in the cat's tone. "I wish you'd stop going off on your own like this! I don't know what I'd do without you!" There was a hint of panic in the she-cats voice.

"You'd do just fine without this old flea-bag dragging you down, Nightstream," Flowerseeker retorted. The other cats in the patrol mewed their objections, guiding Flowerseeker back in the direction of where Skunkpaw assumed their camp was.

After waiting a heartbeat, Skunkpaw emerged from the bush,

deciding to head back towards the Fireclan camp. Her heart had calmed and she no longer felt the anxiety threatening to drown her. *I hope I can see Flowerseeker again…* Skunkpaw thought, smiling to herself.